



Are Elizabeth and Todd heading for disaster?

# DANGEROUS LOVE

created by  
**FRANCINE PASCAL**

# **Dangerous Love (Sweet Valley High #6)**

**Kate William**

# Francine Pascal

Sweet Valley

HIGH

Dangerous Love

Sweet Valley

HIGH

Double Love

Secrets

Playing with Fire

Power Play

All night Long

Dangerous Love

Sweet Valley

HIGH

Dangerous Love

WRITTEN BY KATE WILLIAM

CREATED BY

FRANCINE PASCAL

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# CHAPTER 1

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND why you suddenly have to take over the Jeep again," Jessica Wakefield grumbled, dropping into the passenger seat of the red Jeep she shared with her twin sister, Elizabeth. "Where's Todd? I was getting used to driving myself to school."

"Todd has... Other plans," Elizabeth replied, placing her bag in the back and blatantly avoiding eye contact. "And besides, I need the car after school. I'm covering a story for The Oracle."

Elizabeth slid into the driver's seat, checked all the mirrors, and started the engine. Instantly, the radio blared to life and Elizabeth jumped in surprise. She hit

the Power button to silence the loud dance music Jessica had been listening to on every ride to school for the past two weeks.

"Does it have to be so loud?" Elizabeth admonished her, hand on her heart.

Jessica rolled her eyes. "Whatever, Grandma."

She turned the rearview mirror to her side and checked her makeup. Jessica had been running late and had dashed out of the Wakefield's split-level house without having time to perform her usual ritual in front of the bathroom mirror. Not that she really needed it. With her tan skin, naturally blond hair, big blue-green eyes, and athletic body, Jessica could go entirely without product and still be the hottest girl at Sweet Valley High. Or so her friends were always telling her.

"So, what's the big story?" Jessica asked. She actually had zero interest in her sister's journalistic pursuits, but they had to do something to fill the silence. She rummaged in her leather bag for her makeup kit and applied some blush to her cheeks as Elizabeth pulled out of the driveway.



"Can I please have the mirror back?" Elizabeth said testily, readjusting the rearview while Jessica was in mid-brush-swipe.

"God. You're obnoxious this morning," Jessica said. "So are you going to tell me, or not?"

"Tell you what?" Elizabeth asked as she came to the stop sign at the end of Calico Drive.

Jessica sighed impatiently. "What the story is about."

"Oh. I'm covering the reopening of the Valley Diner," Elizabeth said. "I figure I'll be able to pull double duty, since I'm running low on info for The Insider this week and a lot of people from school are going to be there."

"Yeah. All the losers," Jessica said, wrinkling her nose. "Everyone knows that Casa is the cool hangout now. The only people that are gonna be at the opening of that fat fest are the freshmen who are too intimidated to come to Casa del Sol, and the chunkies who have been salivating for the diner's chocolate milkshakes and cheese fries."

"One of your favorite meals until the place closed for renovations, as I recall," Elizabeth pointed out. "Are you calling yourself a chunky?"

"Liz! Take that back!" Jessica wailed, horrified. "I'm not chunky!"

"Hey, you said it, not me," Elizabeth replied with a short laugh.

Jessica slumped in her seat and stared petulantly out the window at the Pacific Ocean in the distance, the waves glinting in the sun. Even though it was only eight o'clock, the air was already pleasantly warm and a breeze

raffled the palm trees. This is so unfair, Jessica thought. First Liz commandeers the car keys, and then she refuses to put the top down so as not to mess up her responsible pony tail; then she vetoes my music, and now she's picking on me. She could have killed Liz's boyfriend, Todd Wilkins, for having "other plans."

"Hey, Liz. It's totally gorgeous out. Let's stop and take the top down," Jessica said.

"No. We'll be late," Elizabeth snapped.

"But I-"

"Jess! Give it up already!"

Jessica's jaw dropped. "Okay. What is with you this morning? It's a beautiful day and I'm just trying to have some fun before we're stuck in class for the rest of it! Why do you keep biting my head off?"

Elizabeth simply glowered out the windshield, and the answer hit Jessica like a brick to the head. Something was up between Elizabeth and Todd. Not only was he suddenly not picking Liz up for school, but a rift between the two members of SVH's ubercouple was pretty much the only thing that could put her sister in this foul a mood.

"Liz, is something going on with you and Todd?" Jessica asked.

"What? Why do you say that?" Elizabeth asked, her voice tense. Tense enough that Jessica knew she had hit the nail right on the head.

"What happened? Did you guys break up?" Jessica asked, concerned. Even though she often teased Elizabeth about her lovey-dovey relationship with the school's basketball and football star, she knew that Todd made Elizabeth happy, which made Jessica happy. Of course, if he hurt her sister, she would have to kill him, but that remained to be seen.

"No. Nothing like that," Elizabeth replied quickly, turning onto Main Street.

"But there's something," Jessica prompted.

Elizabeth heaved a sigh and looked at Jessica out the corner of her eye. "He got a motorcycle."

"What?" Jessica blurted out, turning sideways in her seat. "No. He didn't. He's not that stupid."

"Apparently, he is," Elizabeth said through her teeth. Then she quickly backtracked. "I mean, he's not stupid. It's just... he's wanted one forever. He doesn't see them the same way we do. He thinks it's just going to be so much fun riding it up and down the coast. ..."

Jessica shook her head. If Todd thought a motorcycle was fun, then he was totally clueless. Motorcycles, in her opinion, were nothing but death traps.

"Anyway, he's driving it to school today," Elizabeth finished.

"Sometimes I really don't get that guy," Jessica said. "He's always walking around, talking about how much

he loves you, but then he goes and puts his life at risk by buying this thing that he knows you can never be a part of. He didn't sell his car, did he? You guys will never go out alone together again!"

"I don't think he's sold his car yet," Elizabeth said. "And, Jess, he's not as heartless as you think he is. He doesn't know about me not being allowed to get on a motorcycle."

"What? Why not?" Jessica asked.

"Because I didn't tell him yet. He thinks I'm as excited about the bike as he is."

"What?" Jessica cried. "Liz! You have to be kidding me! How could you?"

Lying was not a foreign concept to Jessica. She often stretched the truth when it served her purposes. She just couldn't believe that Liz had felt the need to lie about this, of all things, especially considering that lying usually was a last resort for her super-honest and respectable sister. Jessica would have expected her to be particularly forthcoming about this issue, considering what a huge one it was for their family. Jessica would love to see every motorcycle in the world banned from ever hitting pavement, and she had been sure Elizabeth felt the same way. Until now.

"Liz, you're not going to get on that thing, are you? I mean, after what happened to Rex-"

"I know, Jess. And trust me, I have no plans to go anywhere near the bike. We made a pact, remember?" Elizabeth said firmly. "I mean, honestly, it makes me sick to even think of Todd driving around on one of those things, but what was I supposed to do? He's been dreaming of buying a motorcycle since he was a little kid. I couldn't just shatter his dream."

"Oh, so you'd rather he shatter his body, then?"

Elizabeth smirked sadly.

"What?" Jessica said.

"You sounded like me just then," Elizabeth pointed out.

"Well, good, for once," Jessica said, crossing her arms over her chest. "I just hope you still find it amusing when Todd ends up like Rex."

"Jessica, don't say that," Elizabeth snapped, tears welling in her eyes.  
"Never say that."

"Sorry. I just... God, I hate even thinking about it," Jessica said.

Three years ago, after months of begging, the twins' aunt and uncle had finally caved and given their cousin Rex a motorcycle for his sixteenth birthday. He went out and got his license and bought a helmet and took every precaution, just like the responsible guy he was. Everything was fine until three weeks later, when he lost

control of the bike and was killed in a head-on collision. His death had been a devastating shock to everyone, but especially to Jessica, who had adored Rex almost as much as she did her older brother, Steven. After the funeral, Jessica's parents had made all three Wakefield children swear that they would never get on a motorcycle, and they had all agreed. It was one of the few household rules that Jessica obeyed willingly.

"I know, Jess, but I couldn't tell Todd not to get the bike. I'm not going to be one of those girls who goes around telling her boyfriend what to do," Elizabeth said as they approached Sweet Valley High. "It's just not me."

"Even if it means you have to worry about him all the time?" Jessica demanded. "Even if telling him about Rex could, like, save his life?"

"He would have gotten the bike anyway," Elizabeth told her sister. "You know how guys are. He would have just said 'That's horrible, but it's not going to happen to me.' They all think they're indestructible or something."

"So what are you going to do when he asks you to go for a ride?" Jessica asked, curious.

"He already did. He wanted to pick me up this morning," Elizabeth replied.

"And? How did you get out of it?"

"I told him I felt a cold coming on and it wouldn't be good to expose myself to the wind," Elizabeth said.

Jessica smirked. "Oh. So that's why you don't want to put the top down. You're backing up your lie. Not bad, Liz."

"Well, I did learn from the best," Elizabeth said with a sidelong glance.

"Ha-ha. Well, that's fine for today, but what are you going to do tomorrow? Or the next day? Develop a permanent cough?"

Elizabeth's hands gripped the steering wheel. "Look, I know I'm going to have to tell him the truth eventually. I just... I don't want to disappoint him."

Jessica studied Elizabeth's face. She looked genuinely distressed. "You know, Todd might not be my favorite person in the world, but I know he loves you. He's not going to let some stupid bike mess up your relationship."

"You think?" Liz asked uncertainly.

"I know," Jessica said with confidence. She shook her hair back as Liz pulled into the SVH parking lot. "And besides, if there's one thing I'm an expert on, it's guys. And if you keep telling him you're getting a ride with someone else or you want to drive yourself, he's going to start thinking you don't like him anymore. And that would not be good."

"No, it wouldn't," Liz agreed.

"So just tell him the truth," Jessica suggested. "And if he's a jerk about it, then dump him and find yourself a

guy who's not a motorcycle maniac. There are plenty of guys at this school who drive perfectly hot cars with four wheels and airbags and everything."

Elizabeth laughed as she turned into a spot and cut the engine. "Like Danny and his Charger?" she asked with a small smile.

Jessica grinned in return. She had just started dating Danny Stauffer, a senior with a brand-new black Dodge Charger. He was cute but kind of scrawny. Luckily, the car made up for that.

"Exactly," Jessica replied. "Maybe this is just the excuse you need to start checking out your options." She twisted the rearview mirror toward herself again and checked her hair one last time. "Good luck with Todd, but I'll start compiling a short list of worthy boyfriend candidates just in case."

Her sister rolled her eyes as Jessica hopped out of the car and strolled off toward school, wondering what Elizabeth would ever do without her.

Elizabeth smiled ruefully as her sister walked across the Sweet Valley High parking lot, waving to friends and flirting with guys along the way. She knew that Jessica

had a hard time understanding exactly how much she loved Todd. Her sister had yet to experience such a deep relationship with any of her many boyfriends. But in her own way, Jessica had made Liz see how important it was to tell Todd the truth. Not because there were always guys waiting in

the wings if he didn't understand, but because he loved her. If he loved her as much as she thought he did, he would understand.

Slamming the car door behind her, Elizabeth scanned the parking lot for Todd but didn't see him anywhere. She did, however, spot her best friend, Enid Rollins, as Enid got out of the Toyota Prius she'd just received for her sixteenth birthday. Her friend started up the path toward the school, her nose buried in a book as she walked. Her brown hair fell forward to hide her face as dozens of careless kids jostled around her as if she weren't even there.

Why didn't anyone other than Elizabeth seem to notice how cool and smart and funny Enid was? Liz knew that her friend could be shy, but once given a chance, she was so much fun to be around. Elizabeth had gotten to know Enid only the year before, but she knew that Enid had skipped a grade in elementary school and, as a result, had been subjected to a lot of teasing by her older classmates. Maybe that was what made her so introverted. But

one of these days, the girl was going to come out of her shell and Elizabeth couldn't wait to see it happen.

"Enid! Wait up!" she called out, jogging to catch up with her friend.

"Hey, Liz!" Enid said, her face brightening. "Omigod, I'm so glad you're here. I have to talk to you."

"What's up?" Elizabeth asked, hoping that Enid wasn't about to bring up Todd and the motorcycle. The two of them had already gone over the topic a million times, and after that ride in with Jessica, Elizabeth was more than ready to move on to something else.

"It's my mom. She has totally lost it with this birthday party thing," Enid confided, lowering her voice. "I was on my way out the door this morning when she told me I have to come straight home after school so that we can interview calligraphers. Calligraphers! What's to interview? I mean, check out their handwriting, and if it's good, they're hired."

"Calligraphers? Like for invitations?" Elizabeth asked. "But you already invited half the school with that Evite."

Even though Enid's birthday had been the past weekend, her sweet sixteen party wasn't scheduled until the end of the next week--the only day her mother could reserve the largest ballroom at the country club.

"I know! But now my mom's decided that my sweet

sixteen is too special an occasion for just an e-mail invite," Enid said, rolling her eyes. "So she bought these insanely ornate engraved invitations and now we're having them addressed by professionals. It's so embarrassing."

"I don't know, Enid," Elizabeth said as they slowly crossed the lawn. "I think it's nice that your mom's putting so much effort into this party. I mean, she's doing it for you."

"I know, but a big party's not my thing. I had fun just hanging out with you, George, and Todd at Casa," Enid grumbled. George Warren was Enid's boyfriend, who was currently spending his senior year away at boarding school. He had come home the weekend before specifically to see Enid on her actual birthday, and the four of them had gone on a double date to Casa del Sol.

"Well, I think the party will be fun," Elizabeth said with a smile. "All you have to do is let your mom--"

Elizabeth's words were drowned out by the roar of a motorcycle engine. Her heart hit her throat and she stopped abruptly as Todd sped into the SVH parking lot. Suddenly, she couldn't breathe for all the insane emotions churning inside her. She was relieved to see that he'd gotten to school in one piece, but his arrival also meant the moment of truth. She had to tell him she could never ride with him.

Todd pulled the bike to a stop right in front of Elizabeth and Enid. Several people paused to stare and check out the bike. As Todd lifted his helmet off and ran his fingers through his chestnut brown hair, Elizabeth's heart



panged. Somehow he looked even more gorgeous than usual in his soft leather jacket, all self-confident astride his bike. And she wasn't the only one who noticed. A group of sophomore girls across the way were openly checking him out.

"What do you think?" Todd asked Liz with a heart-stopping grin. "How cool is this thing?"

"Todd, it's ..." Elizabeth struggled for a word. Any word. But all she could see was Rex's parents at his funeral.

Then Enid nudged her, pointing out the way Jessica's friend Cara Walker was staring at Todd as if she'd never seen him before--and as if she thought he was beyond hot.

"I love it," Elizabeth heard herself say, stepping possessively toward him. Then she instantly wanted to smack herself. Nice to dig a deeper hole there, Liz, she thought.

Someone whistled and Elizabeth was relieved to see Guy Chesney and Max Dellon, two members of SVH's favorite band, Valley of Death, strolling over.

"Man, sweet ride," Max said, running his fingers over the handlebars.

"Bet we never see you without this puppy again," Guy added.

"Unless there's a torrential downpour, this is my ride," Todd replied happily.

Elizabeth's heart twisted into an impossibly tight knot.

"Has he taken you for a ride yet, Liz?" Max asked.

Elizabeth attempted to smile, but she couldn't. She had just noticed something attached to the side of the bike. A pink helmet. Her helmet, she assumed, another wave of dread washing over her. Todd had bought her a helmet. This was going to be even harder than she'd thought.

"Speaking of," Todd said, looking at her with his warm brown eyes. "Want to go for a quick ride before the bell rings? We'll just go around the block. Your cold can handle that, right?"

Elizabeth took an instinctive step backward and almost flattened Enid's foot. "I... I can't right now," she said apologetically. She checked her watch without remotely registering the time. "I promised Mr. Collins I'd meet him before first period and go over some stuff for The Oracle. Sorry. Maybe later."

She gave her bemused boyfriend a quick kiss on the cheek and jogged off toward school, feeling like a complete idiot and just hoping he wouldn't decide to take any of the many other girls gathered around him for a ride instead.

## CHAPTER 2

Elizabeth was the first person out of her math class when the bell rang. She had to find Todd and explain why she had bailed on him before homeroom. She had to tell him before all this waiting drove her crazy. All morning she had barely been able to concentrate in her classes, and she knew that every time she had seen him in the halls, she had acted cagey, wanting to get away from him as quickly as possible. Jessica was right. Before long he was going to figure out that something was wrong. This secret could end up being fatal to their relationship. Fatal. The very word made Elizabeth cringe. Ever

since Rex's death, the words "fatal" and "motorcycle" had been synonymous in her mind. Rationally, she knew that this was silly; she saw people safely riding motorcycles around Sweet Valley every day. Yet she couldn't squelch that emotional reaction. She felt as if anyone who got on a motorcycle was flirting with death.

Okay, stop it, Elizabeth thought as she rushed down the hall toward the cafeteria. You have to stop thinking that way. For Todd's sake. And for your own.

Elizabeth didn't see Todd at their usual table, and when she checked the food line, he was nowhere to be found. A group of his buddies from the basketball team were messing around with a ball on the outside patio, but he wasn't there, either. Then she noticed that a few of his friends were, as always, hovering around the cheerleaders' table, so Elizabeth reluctantly approached.

"Hey, guys," she said, greeting the group that was made up entirely of Jessica's friends. "Have you seen--"

"Liz, have you heard anything about auditions for the fall play?" Lila Fowler interrupted, flicking her light brown hair over her shoulder. "There's zero info on the Web site about it."

"Oh, I heard it was going to be closer to Thanksgiving this year, so that's probably why," Elizabeth said quickly. Normally, she might have called out Jessica's

best friend for being rude enough to interrupt her, but she had other things on her mind. "You guys haven't seen Todd around, have you?"

The jocks at the table all shrugged.

"Have you tried the lost and found?" Lila joked.

In her state of nervous despair, Liz wanted to pick up Lila's tiny bucket of coleslaw and dump it on her head.

"Lila," Cara Walker said in an admonishing tone. "Is something wrong, Liz?"

Elizabeth immediately attempted a smile. Cara was always trying to sniff out gossip, and the last thing she needed was everyone in school talking about her and Todd.

"No. Everything's fine. I just have to tell him something," Elizabeth said lightly. "But if you guys haven't seen him-"

"Hey, Liz," Ken Matthews said as he approached with a heaping tray of food. Almost every girl in the room watched the tall, blond quarterback as he strolled by, but he seemed oblivious to the attention. "If you're looking for Wilkins, he's out in the parking lot playing with his new toy."

"Thanks, Ken," Elizabeth said, her heart fluttering with nerves. "I should have thought of that."

She turned on her heel and made a beeline for the

parking lot, ignoring her growling stomach. Anything she ate at the moment wouldn't agree with her anyway. She had to get this over with first. When she found Todd, he was crouched next to his bike, wiping off the rims with a white cloth.

"Hey, Liz," he said, smiling up at her. "I can't believe how much dirt I picked up on the ride to school. I'm going to have to spend all my free time keeping this baby clean." He wiped his hands off and stood up to give Elizabeth a hug. "So, how's my motorcycle mama?" he asked teasingly.

Why did he have to be so excited about the whole thing? It just made what she had to do that much harder. Elizabeth pulled away and looked him in the eye. She had to do this quick. Like ripping off a Band-Aid.

"I'm sorry about running off on you this morning. I--"

"It's all good," he said with a shrug. "I know how much The Oracle means to you."

"Thanks," Elizabeth said. "But I--"

"I'm just sorry I didn't get a chance to give you this," Todd interrupted. He unlatched the pink helmet from the bike and tossed it up once before holding it out to her. "I know it's a little bubblegum for you, but it's kind of cool, right? The guy at the shop told me it was one of their biggest sellers, so I guess it's kind of in."

Elizabeth stared at the helmet, her throat going dry.

"Here. Try it on," Todd said. He held out the helmet, and the longer she stood there without making a move, the more his brows knit.

"I... can't," Elizabeth said finally.

"Oh, don't worry. I didn't mean we should go for a ride now. I know you have a cold and we still have to get lunch and everything. I just wanted to see how it looks," he said with a smile.

"No, it's not that," Elizabeth said. She looked up at him, feeling anguished, wishing he could just read her mind so she wouldn't have to say it. He looked so excited it nearly killed her that she was going to have to let him down.

"Don't tell me you're afraid of messing up your hair. Is Jessica starting to rub off on you?" he joked. "Come on, just--" Todd paused when he saw the tears welling up in Elizabeth's eyes. "Are you okay? What's wrong?" he asked.

"I don't have a cold," Elizabeth admitted. "I made that up."

Todd's arms dropped to his sides. "What? Why?"

"I don't know. It was stupid. It was just easier to tell you that than to tell you that I can't..." Elizabeth took a deep breath and held the tears back. "I can't go

anywhere with you on this thing," she said, gesturing at the bike. "And not just today. I mean ever."

Todd was so shocked he almost dropped her helmet on the asphalt. "You can't? Why not?"

Elizabeth took another deep breath. The hard part--the terrible surprise--was over. Now she just had to tell him the awful truth.

"A few years ago my cousin Rex died in a motorcycle accident," she said grimly.

"What?" Todd breathed, his eyes wide.

"It was pretty much the worst time of my life," Elizabeth continued. "Since it happened my parents have forbidden all of us to ever ride on a motorcycle."

"Oh my God." Todd sat back on the seat of his bike. "Liz, I'm so sorry."

"It's ... I mean, it's not okay; it's just..." She shook her head, at a loss. "I don't know."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Todd asked. "You've known I was saving up for this for months."

"I was afraid of how you'd react," Elizabeth admitted.

"How I'd react?" Todd asked, nonplussed. He stood up again and reattached the helmet to the bike. "Like, what? You thought I'd choose the bike over you or something? Like I'd break up with you because you didn't like my motorcycle?"

Elizabeth and Todd looked at each other and Todd smirked.

"Well, when you put it that way, it does sound kind of stupid," Elizabeth said.

"Try very stupid," Todd said, teasing. He reached out a finger and hooked it through one of the belt loops on her jeans, tugging her forward. "C'mere."

Elizabeth's heart skipped a beat as she tripped forward. Todd slid his hands along her cheeks and pulled her in for a long, lingering kiss. When he pulled back, she was so loopy she almost fell into him.

"I love you, Liz," Todd whispered. "I'd never try to make you do something you didn't want to do. And I'd never break up with you because of something like that. Okay?"

"Okay," Elizabeth murmured.

Todd pulled her into his arms, his leather jacket squeaking as he held her close. Elizabeth took a deep breath of his spicy, leathery scent and felt all the tears that had welled in her eyes quickly fade away. Everything was fine. Everything was going to be just fine.

"Thanks for understanding," she said, taking a step back.

"Are you kidding? If something like that had happened in my family, I'd probably feel the same way," he

told her. "I guess you're pretty freaked about me riding this thing, huh?"

"Kind of," Elizabeth replied, biting her lip. "But I know you're going to be careful. You are going to be careful, right?"

"Of course," Todd said, shoving the rag he'd been using into the back pocket of his jeans. "Listen, most of the people who get hurt on these things either don't know what they're doing or aren't properly protected."

Neither was the case with Rex, but whatever, Elizabeth thought sadly.

"I feel awful about what happened to your cousin and your family, but what really sucks is you'll never get to see what it feels like to ride one of these things," Todd said, growing animated. "It's unbelievable."

"You think I'm really missing out, huh?" Elizabeth said, pushing her hands into her pockets as she eyed his bike.

"I know you are. When the weather's warm and sunny like today, it's pretty much the best thing ever," Todd said, his brown eyes glowing with excitement. "I could take you up into the hills and you'd feel the wind wrapping around you.... You'd be able to look around at the trees and the sky and the road and see it like you've never seen it before. You can't get that kind of experience cooped up in a car."

"Yeah, well, that's what convertibles are for," Elizabeth joked.

"It's not the same," Todd said.

Elizabeth sighed and looked at the bike. She wished she could feel even one shred of Todd's excitement, but she couldn't imagine how he could be relaxed and comfortable and enjoy the view when his life depended on his being able to balance five hundred pounds between his legs at fifty-five miles per hour. And why did he have to pick black? The color of death. Briefly, an image of Rex flashed through her mind. She had to shake her head to get rid of it.

Stop it, she told herself. What happened to Rex doesn't have to happen to Todd. What are the chances?

"It really scares you, doesn't it?" Todd said.

"I can't help it," she replied.



"I get it. I do. I was a little nervous the first time I got on one of these things too," Todd said. "But it's not like you think."

"Don't you always feel like you're going to fall off?" Elizabeth asked.

Todd chuckled. "Not really. The bike practically stands up by itself. The only way anything can happen to me is if I'm careless, and I don't plan to be."

"Nobody plans an accident," Elizabeth said, reminding him.

"Liz, come on," Todd said, then clucked his tongue. "I know you're naturally cautious and practical, but think about it. What happened to your cousin doesn't happen to everyone who gets on a motorcycle. Otherwise they'd ban these things."

"I know," Elizabeth said with a shrug. "It's just... it's going to take a while for me to get used to it."

Todd glanced back at his bike, then looked at her with a question in his eyes. "If your parents changed their minds and lifted their rule, do you think you would ever consider riding with me?"

Elizabeth looked away, unable to meet his hopeful gaze. "They'll never change their minds. They loved Rex and they don't want to see that happen to any of us."

"What if I talk to them?" Todd asked, taking her hand lightly. "Maybe if they hear what a safe driver I am, they'll reconsider."

Elizabeth knew that it would be pointless, but she couldn't let him down again. "Okay. You can ask them. Just... don't get your hopes up."

"Cool. I'll come over tonight," Todd said with a grin.

A wave of dread washed over Elizabeth. What if her parents had a joint moment of insanity and said yes? What was she going to do then? It wasn't like she was going to feel any safer if they did.

"Tonight? Really?" she said, her mouth dry.

"Why not? The sooner the better," Todd replied, shouldering his backpack. "Thanks, Liz. I bet any money I can talk them into it."

I really hope not, Elizabeth thought. "We'll see," she said. "Do you want to go inside and get some lunch? We only have fifteen minutes."

"Crap, is that all?" Todd said, checking his watch. "Actually, I can't eat with you today. I have to go meet Winston and Mandy in the courtyard."

"What for?" Elizabeth asked as they headed back toward the school.

"Mr. Marks grouped us together for this project. We all have to pick a charity and do an overview of their effectiveness or something," Todd said quickly. "We only have a few days, so we have to get right to work."

"Wow. So you're gonna be kind of busy," Elizabeth said, sensing an opportunity. "If you can't come over tonight, I totally understand."

"Hey! Never too busy for you." Todd gave her a quick kiss and squeezed her hand. "We're still going to the Valley Diner thing after practice, right? I'll meet you there?"

"Definitely."

"And maybe next time we go, we'll go on my bike!" Todd said with a grin.

He turned and jogged off before Elizabeth had a chance to respond. Apparently, Todd had spaced on the fact that it wasn't just her parents who hated motorcycles; it was her, too. But at least he had been understanding for the most part, and as she joined the lunch line inside, she felt as if a huge weight had been lifted off her heart.

Todd was still her boyfriend. He wasn't going anywhere.

## CHAPTER 3

The Valley Diner lot was already more than half filled by the time Elizabeth pulled in with the Jeep that evening after her Oracle meeting. She found an empty space near the back, killed the engine, and took a good look at the refurbished hangout. She had been driving by it the whole time it had been under construction, so she had seen the changes as they were being made, but now she checked the whole thing over with a reporter's eyes.

The owners had gone for a 1950s vibe that totally worked. It was all chrome and neon and looked welcoming. The scent of frying burgers and french fries wafting

If

through the open front door helped as well. Liz could already see that the booths near the window were jam-packed with kids from school. She smiled as she got out of the car. As much as she loved Casa del Sol, it was all the way out by the water. Valley Diner was closer to school and home, so it was going to be nice to have it up and running again.

Inside, the retro look continued with chrome and Formica tables, vinyl booths, and menus with bright drawings of various dishes. The walls were decorated with SVH memorabilia--everything from ancient lettermen's sweaters to megaphones to photos from state championships the sports teams had won through the years. Elizabeth even caught a photo of her sister's smiling face as she hugged Cara and Lila after their state championship cheerleading win the past spring. Leave it to Jessica to make the wall of fame. She was sure that as soon as her sister heard about that, she would no longer think the Valley Diner was such an uncool hangout.

Elizabeth scanned the room, looking for an empty table or a spot at the counter, but everything was taken. Great. How was she supposed to write a thorough article if she couldn't even sample the food? Then she saw Robin Wilson flagging her down from a booth next to

the front windows. Freshly showered after cheerleading practice, Robin was wearing an SVH hoodie and sitting with her new boyfriend, Allen Walters. The two of them sipped sodas as they waited for their food.

"Hey," Elizabeth said with a smile, walking over to them. "I can't believe how crowded this place is."

"Seriously. It's a madhouse. Wanna sit with us?" Robin asked, sliding toward the window.

"You don't mind?" Elizabeth asked, glancing at Allen. "I don't want to interrupt."

"Don't worry about it," Allen said. "It's not like this is the locale for a romantic date or something."

In the back of the restaurant, someone shrieked and a tray crashed to the ground; that noise was followed by a round of applause and cheers. Elizabeth, Robin, and Allen laughed.

"Yeah. I guess it's not the most lovey-dovey setting," Elizabeth joked, sitting down next to Robin. "Actually, I'm supposed to be writing an article about the opening for The Oracle. Want to do the pictures?" she asked Allen, who was one of the photographers for the Web site.

"Sure," Allen replied, pulling his camera from its bag, which sat next to him on the bench. "I'm always up for an assignment."

The waitress appeared and placed Robin's and Allen's

food before them--a grilled chicken sandwich for Robin and a bacon cheeseburger for Allen. Elizabeth's stomach grumbled at the sight of the food. Allen snapped a picture of the heaping plates before reaching for a fry.

"What can I get you, hon?" the waitress asked, looking frazzled.

"I'll have the Valley Diner signature burger with fries and a chocolate milk shake," Elizabeth replied. "Oh! And some onion rings."

"You got it," the waitress said, moving quickly back to the kitchen.

"Wow. Hungry?" Robin joked, twisting her dark hair back into a ponytail.

Elizabeth blushed. "I have to try their most popular dishes, right? For the article."

"Yeah, yeah. Good excuse," Allen teased, taking a huge bite of his messy burger. His eyes rolled back in ecstasy. "Omigod. I want to marry this burger."

Elizabeth and Robin laughed as Elizabeth whipped out her digital recorder. "Can I quote you on that?"

"Definitely," Allen replied, digging into the fries.

"So, where's Todd?" Robin asked as she added the sliced tomato and lettuce to her sandwich. "Shouldn't you two be out joyriding or something?"

Elizabeth forced a smile. "I have the Jeep today, so I

drove myself here," she replied. "Todd should be here soon, though. He said he'd meet me after practice."

She glanced past Robin out the window, realizing that Todd should have arrived by then. What was keeping him? Suddenly, she found herself imagining him lying in a heap on the road with his bike beside him, and her breath caught. Sometimes having a vivid imagination was a bad thing. She took a deep breath and told herself to calm down. Todd was a responsible guy. He wasn't going to go speeding around like a maniac.

And if you don't start trusting him, you're going to turn yourself into a nervous wreck, she thought.

She was just about to tear her eyes away from the window when she saw Danny Stauffer's black Charger roar into the parking lot with Jessica sitting in the passenger seat. Danny had been driving fast and he slammed on the brakes a little too late. Elizabeth gasped as the Charger bumped the rear fender of a big blue SUV.

"Oh my God!" she said.

"What happened?" Robin asked.

All the people at the window tables were up on their knees, checking out the situation in the parking lot. Luckily, it appeared that no real damage had been done, and both Jessica and Danny looked fine. Startled, but fine. Elizabeth was about to relax when the owner of the

SUV got out and stormed over to Danny's car. It was Jerry "Crunch" McAllister-pretty much the most belligerent guy ever to have attended Sweet Valley High.

"Oh, crap," Allen said under his breath.

"Danny's a dead man," some guy at the next table added.

Just like that, half of the diner's customers, including Elizabeth, emptied out the front door to see what would happen next. Elizabeth's heart was in her throat as she scurried down the stairs outside. Jerry hadn't gotten his nickname, Crunch, for nothing. As starting defensive end on the SVH football team, Crunch McAllister had recorded more sacks than anyone else in the history of the school-until his playing career was cut short by a knee injury. Jerry had never been much of a student, so once he'd been deemed unable to play, he dropped out of school. That had been the past fall. Ever since, he had been working construction jobs around town and was regularly spotted stumbling out of Kelly's, the seedy bar down by the beach. Even though he was under twenty-one, he never seemed to have any problem getting alcohol, and he had a reputation for being drunk most of his waking hours--which only made him nastier. Elizabeth could only hope that he wasn't drunk then.

Danny had maneuvered his car into the space next to

the SUV. He rolled down the window when he saw Crunch approaching.

"Hey, man," he said, attempting a smile. "Sorry about that. But no damage done, right?"

"Get out," Crunch grunted.

"Ten to one says Crunch pummels him into next week," Bruce Patman said.

"Why don't you go help him?" Elizabeth suggested. "Aren't you and Danny supposed to be friends?"

"Please, Wakefield. I don't like the guy enough to get killed for him," Brace said with a scoff.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. Bruce was one of the wealthiest guys at SVH-and one of the hottest, according to Jessica and her friends. Or at least Jessica had felt that way before their over-before-it-began romance had recently ended--and badly. Elizabeth could sort of see it, what with Bruce's dark hair offsetting his light blue eyes and everything, but she had always thought there was a lot less to him than met the eye. He'd just proven her right.

"Come on, man! Get out of the car!" Crunch demanded more loudly now.

Danny glanced nervously at Jessica, who looked like she wanted to disappear. This was not the kind of attention she liked, Elizabeth knew. The last thing Jessica wanted was for the entire school to see her new

boyfriend wimp out in the face of danger. Danny must have realized that too, because he finally, reluctantly, got out of the car.

Fear evident through his thin facade of bravado, Danny stepped out and faced the much taller, much more ripped Crunch McAllister. Jessica instantly slipped out the other door and scurried to Elizabeth's side, a safe distance away.

"He's going to kill him," Jessica predicted. "I can't watch."

But just like the rest of the SVH crowd, she didn't look away.

"I thought you were too cool to hang out here," Elizabeth said under her breath.

"Well, Danny wanted to come, so ..."

"He's about to regret that decision," Bruce joked from behind them.

Crunch grabbed the front of Danny's jacket and dragged him over to the SUV. Everyone gasped, but no one made a move to help. Elizabeth felt ashamed of the guys in her class and wished she could do something, but what? Go over and smack Crunch's shoulder with her book bag? He probably wouldn't even feel it.

"Look what you did!" Crunch roared, pointing his free hand at his bumper.

Danny relaxed a little bit, even though he was still in

Crunch's clutches. "It's just a tiny dent. You can barely even see it."

"You need your eyes checked, buddy, because I can see it just fine," Crunch replied. He dragged Danny around the side of the SUV. Danny tried to pull away, but to no avail. His face started to turn red with embarrassment and Elizabeth felt sick to her stomach. "Look at it," Crunch demanded. "Not a dent, not a mark, not a scratch anywhere until you came along."

Danny yanked himself backward and finally got free of Crunch's grip. He straightened his jacket and took a deep breath. "What do you want, Crunch?" he asked. "You want a few bucks to have a body shop guy bang that ding out of the bumper? You got it."

He reached for his wallet in his back pocket, but Crunch shoved him into the side of the SUV with a bang. Once again, everyone gasped.

"What I want is for losers like you to have more respect for my car," Crunch said, getting right in Danny's face.

"He's just looking for a fight," Allen said under his breath. "He just wants someone to pulverize."

"Dude, I'm ... I'm sorry," Danny said, raising his hands. "I don't know what you want me to do here. I--"

"How about you say your prayers," Crunch said through his teeth.



He drew back his fist. Danny closed his eyes. Finally, a couple of guys in the crowd sprang forward as if to tackle Crunch, but before they could, the loud roar of an engine caught everyone's attention. Even Crunch looked up as Todd's motorcycle zoomed into the parking lot. Danny opened one eye in a squint to see what had stopped his execution.

Todd pulled his bike to a halt at the end of the row of cars, and Elizabeth stopped breathing. He wasn't alone. There was a girl on the back of his bike, and she was wearing the pink helmet. Elizabeth's helmet. She had her arms locked tightly around Todd's torso. Elizabeth's heart was in her throat. Who the heck was this girl clinging to her boyfriend? Before she could even recover from her shock and figure out what to do next, Crunch let go of Danny and walked over to the still-idling bike, whistling.

"Nice ride, man," Crunch said, as if Danny were completely forgotten. "Ducati, right?"

"Yep." Todd took his helmet off and rested it on the gas tank. "How's it going, Crunch?" he asked, offering his hand, which Crunch quickly clasped. The two knew each other from football, and Todd was always defending Crunch when people trash-talked him. He had always managed to see Crunch's good side. Whatever that was.

"Not bad, Wilkins. How's she ride?" Crunch asked, salivating as he looked the bike over.

Todd held out his helmet. "Why don't you try her out and see?"

"Really?" Crunch's eyes lit up like a little kid's. "I'd kill for a bike like this."

"So go ahead. Try her out," Todd said.

"Just let me get off first," the girl on the back of the bike said with a laugh. She swung her long leg around, pulled off the pink helmet, and shook out her dark hair. It was Mandy Farmer, the girl who was supposedly working on some project with Todd. Elizabeth had never thought much about Mandy, but now that she saw her there holding her helmet, her dark hair

tossed by the breeze, Mandy suddenly looked tall, lithe, beautiful, and confident. Elizabeth's temples began to throb.

Okay, you are not jealous, she thought. There is no reason to be jealous. Mandy is a nice, nonthreatening girl. Todd was just giving her a ride after school.

Which would have seemed a lot more innocent if she hadn't had her arms around him and her chest pressed into his back and--

Okay, not thinking about it!

"Thanks, man," Crunch said, straddling the seat Todd had just vacated. "I'll bring her right back."

"You'd better," Todd joked.

He and Mandy stood back as Crunch revved the engine, then took off. Instantly, the atmosphere around the Valley Diner relaxed.

"Dude. You just saved my life," Danny told Todd, grasping his hand.

Todd, having no clue what had preceded his arrival, looked perplexed. "Okay."

Crisis averted, the crowd began to make their way back into the diner, babbling about everything that had just happened. Jessica and Danny joined the throng, and Mandy handed the pink helmet to Todd as she walked by, thanking him for the ride. Elizabeth made herself smile at the girl, who had, after all, done nothing wrong.

"Okay, what did I miss?" Todd asked Elizabeth, unzipping his leather jacket.

"Oh, Crunch was just about to kick Danny's butt for dinging his car when you rode in here and broke the whole thing up," Elizabeth said with a shrug and a smile. "Guess you did your good deed for the day and you didn't even know it."

Todd grinned and slipped his arms around Elizabeth's waist. "Huh. Cool."

He leaned down to kiss Elizabeth and she sank into

him, forgetting all about Mandy. A few minutes later, they heard the roar of the Ducati's engine and Crunch flew back into the parking lot. He stopped the bike, killed the engine, and walked over to Todd and Liz.

"Dude. If you ever want to sell that baby, let me know," Crunch said, handing Todd's helmet and keys back to him. "That was freaking awesome."

"Don't hold your breath, man," Todd responded, bending over to attach both helmets to the bike. "I plan to keep this thing until it dies of old age. But if you ever want to take her out again, let me know."

"Thanks, man," Crunch said, slapping hands with Todd.

He walked over to his SUV and got right behind the wheel without even checking the dent again. Maybe Allen was right. Maybe Crunch had just been looking for anyone to fight. But apparently, riding Todd's motorcycle had gotten rid of any pent-up adrenaline he'd had in him. He pulled out of the parking lot and drove off as if nothing had happened.

Todd and Elizabeth turned and walked inside, where Mandy, Jessica, and Danny were all waiting for tables. The owner of the diner came out from behind the counter and shook Todd's hand.

"Thanks for distracting that kid. He has some temper,"

the portly man said, then whistled. "I could a had a lawsuit on my hands the first day back."

"It was nothing, really," Todd replied.

"Well, it's not to me," the owner said. "I'm gonna comp your meal. You and your lovely lady's. Whatever you want."

He put: one beefy arm around Todd and slung the other ... around Mandy's shoulders.

Elizabeth felt like she was going to throw up right there on the freshly tiled floor. Jessica shot her a stunned look and Mandy blushed beet red.

"Oh," Todd said, taken off guard. "Well ... thanks, but..."

"I'm not his lady," Mandy said with a laugh, ducking away. "She is."

Mandy pointed at Liz, who lifted a hand in a slight, embarrassed wave.

For a moment, the owner looked flummoxed, but then he laughed. "Fine, then! Free food for you and your two lovely ladies!"

Todd rolled his eyes like it was all too funny, but Elizabeth felt as if she were dying a little on the inside. Apparently, she wasn't the only one who had noticed how cozy Todd and Mandy had looked on his bike. Past the owner's shoulder, she saw Robin and Allen sitting at

their table with her huge plate of food waiting for her. Suddenly, she wasn't feeling hungry at all anymore. Not the tiniest bit.

"So, did you tell Todd off, or what?" Jessica said as she and Elizabeth emptied the dishwasher together that night. "Did you make him grovel? I hope you made him grovel."

Elizabeth dropped a pile of forks into the utensil drawer with a clatter. She had known all night that this was coming, but it still irritated her that Jessica felt the need to bring it up.

"Grovel? For what?" she asked innocently, slamming the drawer with her hip.

"Oh, please. We all saw Mandy ride up on that bike with Todd," Jessica said. "You can't tell me you weren't pissed."

Elizabeth's face warmed and she turned away from her sister to yank open the cabinet doors. "Why would I be pissed?"

"Because it's totally obvious that all Todd cares about is keeping the backseat of his bike warm!" Jessica exclaimed, frustrated.

"Give me a break, Jess," Elizabeth said calmly, even though her heart was pounding around inside her chest. "He was just giving her a ride."

"Yeah. Let's hope that's all he was giving her," Jessica said under her breath as she put a platter away.

"Jessica! Ew!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "Thanks a lot!"

"I'm just saying!" Jessica replied, wide-eyed. "Didn't you notice the way she was clinging to him when they pulled up? It didn't look so innocent to me."

"How else was she supposed to stay on the bike?" Elizabeth snapped, echoing the words she had been using all afternoon to try to make herself feel better. She shoved a plate into the cabinet and closed the door. "It was no big deal," she added. "She and Todd are working on a class project together and he gave her a lift after they were done. End of story."

Once Liz and Todd had found their own table at the diner, Todd had explained that he had met up with Winston and Mandy for a few minutes after football practice to make sure they knew what their assignments were for their project. That had been his reason for being late. Liz wished he had offered Winston a ride instead of Mandy, but she hadn't said anything. She had simply attempted to let the whole thing go.

Besides, Winston would have looked pretty ridiculous

in that pink helmet. He never would have lived that one down.

"Well, whatever. I just know that if it was my boyfriend, I wouldn't tolerate some random girl draping herself all over him like that," Jessica said with a shrug. "And in front of the entire school. So humiliating."

"Again. Thanks a lot," Elizabeth replied. "I don't know what you want me to do. I mean, I'm not going to tell Todd to get rid of the bike and I'm not

going to be the jealous girlfriend who demands he never let anyone else ride on it. I've got to have a little self-respect."

"I'm not saying you should demand he never give rides to anyone else," Jessica replied, checking out her fingernails as she leaned back against the kitchen counter. "I'm just saying no strange girls allowed."

Elizabeth scoffed. "Mandy isn't a strange girl. We've known her since kindergarten."

"Yeah, well, even people you've known since kindergarten aren't above stealing your boyfriend," Jessica groused.

Elizabeth swallowed hard. "There is nothing going on between Todd and Mandy."

"Maybe not now," Jessica said, shoving away from the counter. "But I'd keep my eyes open if I were you," she added, giving Elizabeth a good slap on the shoulder.

"Can we change the subject already?" Elizabeth asked. "And PS, I don't want you jumping all over Todd about this when he comes over later. He's my boyfriend. I'll deal with it."

"Todd's coming over later?" Jessica asked, closing the dishwasher.

"Yeah. He wants to try to convince Mom and Dad to let me break the no-motorcycle rule," Elizabeth said.

"What?" Jessica blurted out, going ashen. "You're not actually thinking about getting on that thing, are you?"

"No. Of course not," Elizabeth answered automatically. "But Todd keeps talking about how safe it is. And lots of people do ride them every day without getting hurt--"

The truth was that ever since she'd seen Mandy holding on to Todd on his bike that afternoon, she had started to consider the possibility--just the possibility-- of one day riding with him. It wasn't fair that some other girl

got to be that close to him, got to experience this thing with him that he loved so much--and that she didn't.

"Yeah, and a lot of people ride them and end up getting hurt! Like Rex!" Jessica shouted angrily.

"Jess, please calm down," Elizabeth hissed, worried that their parents might overhear.

"Forget it. I'm not sticking around to listen to you talk Mom and Dad into letting you on that death machine," Jessica said, grabbing her jacket off the hook near the door. "I'll be at Cara's if you wake up from your dream world."

She shoved through the back door and slammed it behind her. Elizabeth took a deep breath and let it out, collapsing forward onto the counter. She understood how Jessica felt, but she understood how Todd felt too. To him, his bike was just a means of transportation, no more dangerous than a car in the right hands. Accidents happened to people who drove cars, too, but she didn't go around worrying every time her sister or brother or parents got behind the wheel.

Elizabeth buried her head in her arms and groaned. Usually she was so utterly positive of what was right and what was wrong, but this time she was completely stumped.

## CHAPTER 4

"We appreciate your coming over tonight," Ned Wakefield said, leaning forward on the opposite couch.

Elizabeth glanced up, awoken from her thoughts by what sounded like the beginnings of a goodbye. "Most guys in your situation wouldn't have bothered, I suspect."

Todd glanced at Elizabeth as if looking for backup. All she could do was shrug and smile in an apologetic way. "But that doesn't change your mind, does it?" Todd asked her dad.

"I'm afraid not," Mr. Wakefield replied. "I'm sure you're a capable driver, and you've impressed us with your concern for safety, but I still can't allow my daughter to ride a motorcycle. It's just not going to happen."

"I hope you understand, Todd," Mrs. Wakefield added gently. "It's not about you at all."

"Thanks. I get it. Liz's safety is the most important thing," Todd said.

Elizabeth's parents beamed and she knew that Todd had just said exactly what they wanted to hear.

"Well, thanks for your time anyway," Todd said, rising from the couch. "I promise you'll never see your daughter on my bike."

Mr. Wakefield rose as well. "That's one promise I'm going to hold you to," he said seriously. Elizabeth's heart dropped at his tone. Todd had already backed off. Did her dad really have to be so gloom-and-doom about

it? His seriousness had hit home with Todd as well. He gulped and looked at Elizabeth, who quickly jumped up.



"I guess I should go," Todd said. "We've both got a lot of homework, so ..."

"Sure. I'll... uh ... walk you to the door," Elizabeth replied. She wasn't sure whether to feel relieved that it was over or sorry for Todd for getting shot down. The whole thing had clearly meant a lot to him and she felt bad that his feelings had been hurt.

"Good night, Todd," Elizabeth's mother called after them.

He lifted a hand sheepishly. "Good night, Mr. and Mrs. Wakefield."

"You okay?" Elizabeth asked him the moment they were alone in the front hall.

"Yeah," Todd said with a sigh. He rolled his shoulders back, like he was trying to get comfortable for the first time all night. "I had to try."

"I guess," Elizabeth responded, realizing again how important this was to Todd.

"Hey, don't worry, though. We're still cool," Todd assured her, looking her in the eye. "So what if we can't drive everywhere together? As long as we're together when we get there, that's all that matters, right?"

Elizabeth smiled and let out a breath. "Right,"

Todd reached for her hand and tugged her closer. Elizabeth's heart swooped in her surprise. "Do you think your parents would mind if I kissed you in their hall, or should I ask their permission first?"

Elizabeth laughed. "There are some things I can still do without parental permission."

She grabbed the front of his jacket and pulled him toward her, standing on her toes to touch her lips to his. After a long moment, they finally parted and Elizabeth smiled up at him. Todd's eyes were still closed, as if he couldn't think of what he was supposed to do next.

"Maybe I should stay a little longer," he whispered.

"Nice try," Elizabeth replied, reaching up to turn him toward the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay! Okay! You don't have to drop-kick me out of here," Todd said with a laugh.

"I think I do."

She opened the front door for him and he stepped out onto the walkway. Elizabeth caught sight of his bike parked near the curb and her heart skipped a nervous beat.

"Todd, could you do me a favor?" she asked.

He paused and looked back at her. "Anything."

"Just call me when you get home," she said, feeling almost silly for asking.

Todd smiled knowingly. "Sure. And I'll even drive extra slow just for you."

"Thanks," Liz said.

She lingered in the entryway for a few minutes, waiting until his taillight was completely out of sight, before closing the door. It wasn't until that moment that she realized how relieved she was that her parents had stuck by their rule. Clearly, just the sight of Todd's bike freaked her out. How would she have handled it if she had ever had to climb on the thing?

With a sigh, Elizabeth trudged up to her room and settled in at her desk. She pulled out her Spanish notebook and got down to work. There was nothing better to blot out the day's events than a couple of hours of total homework immersion. Of course, two seconds in, her sister barged into her room without a knock.

"Liz, we have to talk," Jessica announced, dropping onto the edge of Elizabeth's double bed.

"I'm not riding with Todd," Elizabeth said without looking up from her notebook. The last thing she wanted to do right then was hash out the whole

situation for the ten millionth time that day.

"Oh, I know. I overheard all that when I was

eavesdropping downstairs," Jessica said with a wave of her hand. "I got back from Cara's half an hour ago."

"Jess!" Elizabeth protested, glaring at her sister.

"What? Sometimes it's the only way to find out what the heck is going on around here," Jessica said with a shrug. "Anyway. That wasn't what I wanted to talk to you about."

Elizabeth let out a frustrated sigh. "Fine. What is it? I have a lot of work to do."

"Do you remember Enid's cousin Brian?" Jessica asked, getting up and walking over to Elizabeth's dresser to toy with her jewelry box.

"Yeah," Elizabeth said. Foreboding skittered down her spine. "What about him?"

"Do you know if he's going to be around for Enid's party?" Jessica asked, still avoiding eye contact.

Elizabeth swiveled her desk chair to the left to better see her sister. "As far as I know. They're really close."

"That's nice," Jessica replied, dropping the lid of the jewelry box down with a bang. "I mean, that he's coming all the way down from UCLA. He still goes there, right?"

"Yeah. He's a sophomore," Elizabeth replied, growing impatient. "Jess, what's this all about?"

"I don't know; I was just thinking about him and how

much fun we had playing volleyball on the beach last summer, and I was wondering . . ."

"If I'd get Enid to set you two up," Elizabeth said flatly.

"Yes! Exactly! Thank you so much, Liz! I knew you would help!" Jessica trilled, catching Elizabeth up in a hug--or as much of a hug as she could give while Elizabeth was sitting.

"No way, jess. I'm not doing it," Elizabeth said, trying to wriggle from her sister's grasp.

"Why not?" Jessica asked. She stood up straight, suddenly indignant.

Elizabeth's jaw dropped. "Why not? Are you kidding me? How could you even think about asking me to ask Enid to do you a favor after what you did to her?"

About a month back Jessica had found out a shady secret from Enid's past and had spread it all over the school. The scandal had resulted in Enid's breakup with Ronnie Edwards and had put the two girls at odds ever since. Elizabeth knew that Enid hadn't forgiven Jessica and she had a feeling her friend never would.

"Omigod. I can't believe you're still hung up on that," Jessica said, crossing her arms over her chest. "So I told Ronnie and some people about her less-than-perfect past. It wasn't like any of it was a lie. Besides, she wouldn't even be going out with that hot boarding

school guy if she hadn't broken up with lame-o Edwards. I did her a favor."

"Wow. That's some logic you've got going there," Elizabeth said sarcastically, returning to her work.

"So that's it? You're just going to ignore me now?" Jessica demanded, throwing her hands up.

"Jess, you may be right that it all worked out in the end, but at the time Enid was crashed," Elizabeth admonished. "And you had zero sympathy for her and zero regret for what you'd done."

"Oh, great, so now you're going to lecture me for how I acted a million years ago?" Jessica demanded. "That's real nice, Liz. I guess no one's allowed to ever make a mistake in your perfect presence."

Jessica turned to flounce out of the room and Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Jess, stop."

"What?" Jessica asked, turning around again.

"Just calm down, okay?" Elizabeth said, rubbing her forehead. "You don't have to get all dramatic."

"Why shouldn't I? I did help you out with your whole Todd thing this morning, didn't I?" Jessica asked, tossing her blond hair back.

"Yes...."

"So why can't you do me this one teeny, tiny favor in return?" Jessica demanded.

Elizabeth sighed and looked down at her blank notebook

page, weighing her options. She could tell Jessica no and watch her throw another tantrum. Or she could tell Jessica yes and give it a try. She was sure Enid would say no anyway, but asking wouldn't hurt anyone. And going with option B meant she could get back to her homework sooner.

"Okay, fine. I'll ask her," Elizabeth said finally.

"Yes!" Jessica cheered.

"But don't be surprised if she says no," Elizabeth warned.

"Oh, please. She can't say no to you," Jessica said, reaching for the door to the bathroom that connected Elizabeth's room to hers. "That girl worships the ground you walk on. Omigod! Brian and I are going to look so perfect together! I can't wait!"

She bounded out of the room and Elizabeth's head hit her arm on the desk. It was amazing how often she found herself in that position after the whirlwind that was her sister left the room.

"Thanks again for offering to drive me to school," Enid said as she and Elizabeth sipped their orange juice in the Wakefields' kitchen. "My dad was suddenly all about: getting my car checked over, like it was going to explode if he didn't. The thing's brand-new!"

"Maybe your parents are pimping your ride for your birthday," Elizabeth said with a teasing smile.

Enid's face paled. "Oh, God! I hope not! If my Prius comes back all hot pink with a sushi bar in the trunk, I swear I'll disown them."

They both laughed as Elizabeth deposited their empty glasses in the sink. She checked her watch and sighed. "We should probably get going."

"What about Jessica?" Enid asked, shouldering her book bag.

"Never-on-Time Girl? I'll get her," Elizabeth replied.

Together they walked to the front hall and the stairs. Elizabeth grabbed the banister and shouted up to her sister. "Jess! Let's go! We're gonna be late!"

"I'll be right down!" Jessica called.

"That means about fifteen minutes," Elizabeth said, translating for Enid. "Come on. Let's go wait outside. It's so nice out."

Enid and Elizabeth walked out and dropped down onto the wooden bench near the front window of the house. Elizabeth took a deep breath of the fresh morning air and tipped her head back, glad she no longer had to stress out about Todd and lying to him about head colds and early-morning meetings.

"So, I heard I missed out on some serious drama at the diner yesterday," Enid said.

"Oh, yeah. That," Elizabeth replied, unenthused.

"Come on! I heard Todd totally swooped in and saved Danny Stauffer's butt!" Enid said, her green eyes sparkling.

"He didn't exactly swoop in," Elizabeth said. "He was more in the right place at the right time."

"Wow. Way to downplay your boyfriend's act of heroism," Enid joked. "Aren't you supposed to be swooning over it and stuff?"

Elizabeth looked down at her canvas bag in her lap and toyed with the strap. She didn't know why she couldn't get excited about Todd's role in the diner drama. Normally, she would have been retelling the story in vivid detail. Maybe she was letting the motorcycle thing affect her feelings. Which would be bad. And she really didn't want to think about it.

"How's the party planning going?" Elizabeth asked, abruptly changing the subject.

Enid rolled her eyes toward the sky. "My mom has officially lost her mind. Last night I overheard her on the phone freaking out on the caterer. 'If your idea of haute cuisine is pigs in blankets, then I see no reason to continue this conversation,'" she said, mimicking her mother's pinched voice.

"I love pigs in blankets!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"Me too!" Enid said, wide-eyed. "But Mom insists on going first-class all the way. It wouldn't surprise me if we ended up with caviar on toast points. So gross."

"I bet Lila and Bruce will eat it," Elizabeth joked.

"If Lila and Bruce even come," Enid said wryly. Her mother had forced her to invite everyone in the junior and senior classes, but Enid had never spoken one word to Bruce Patman, and she and Lila were as good as strangers. "Speaking of... I brought your invitation. I'm going to mail most of them, but I figured since I see you every day ..."

Enid leaned down to pick up her backpack, which she had dropped at her feet. When she unzipped the side, papers and notebooks came spilling out in disarray. For two people who were so very different, Enid and Jessica definitely had the disorganized thing in common. As soon as Elizabeth thought of Jessica, she remembered her sister's request and swallowed a lump of nervousness in her throat.

"Did you send one to your cousin Brian?" she asked.

"Yeah. Didn't I tell you he was coming?" Enid asked, glancing up from her dig through the bag. "He'll be here the Friday before."

"Right. I forgot," Elizabeth said, fibbing. "You know, I don't think I've seen him since the summer."

Enid smiled. "That's because he hasn't been here since then."

"I bet you can't wait to see him," Elizabeth said.

"Are you kidding? He's the closest thing I have to a brother, which means I can totally complain to him about my mom," Enid replied. She paused and sat up straight. "What's with the sudden interest in Brian?"

Elizabeth blushed and felt her confidence slip away. "Nothing. I was just curious. I mean, I'm glad he'll be around. For you."

Enid eyed Elizabeth quizzically. "Well, thanks," she replied, her tone doubtful. "So tell me already. What happened when Todd laid out Crunch McAllister?"

Elizabeth laughed. "He didn't lay him out. All he did was let him go for a ride on the Ducati."

"No! Come on! That's not what I heard!" Enid said, looking disappointed.

"Are you forgetting how the grapevine works around here?" Elizabeth asked.

"Good point," Enid said.



At that moment, they both heard the telltale roar of Todd's motorcycle engine. Elizabeth's heart skipped a beat. What was he doing there? He didn't still think he could change her mind about riding with him, did he?

Her stomach tightened as she turned around and saw

Todd approaching on the bike. About a block away, he cut the engine and rolled silently along the curb until he reached the driveway.

"Hey!" Elizabeth greeted him, standing as he removed his helmet. "What're you doing here?"

"Well, good morning to you, too," he joked with a smile.

Elizabeth smiled and jogged over to give him a kiss. "Sorry. I was just surprised."

"Honestly? Me too." Todd got off the bike and hugged her. "I started to come up your street to pick you up when I realized I wasn't in my car. I guess old habits die hard."

"Well, I am very happy they do," Elizabeth said, kissing him again. She was relieved that he wasn't there to try to talk her into a ride on his bike. And pleased that he was so used to being with her he had come over by rote.

"Hey!" Enid called out, holding up a pair of thick cream-colored envelopes. "I finally found your invites."

She walked across the lawn and handed them each an envelope.

"What's this?" Todd asked.

"Open them," Enid said with an amused smile.

Elizabeth carefully ran her finger under the flap and

opened the gold-lined envelope. Inside was an elegantly engraved invitation. A piece of tissue paper stamped with Enid's initials separated the invite from the RSVP card. Todd whistled.

"Wow. What are these made of? Silk?" he joked.

"No, but they cost about as much as silk," Enid replied, rolling her eyes.

"Big waste of money, if you ask me, but no one did."

"Hey. Your mom thinks you're worth it and so do I," Elizabeth said, tucking the invitation back into the envelope.

"Thanks," Enid said, blushing happily. "So, are you guys in? Want to help me get through this whole sham?"

"You know I'm there," Elizabeth said.

"I am too," Todd said, slipping the invitation into the outer pocket of his backpack. "I just might be a little late. My grandfather's having a birthday party that afternoon, so I'm going to have to rush home and change and then come over. But I'll be there."

"Cool," Enid said. "It'll be nice to have some friendly faces around."

"Hey, how about a little pre-birthday present?" Todd suggested with a smile.

Elizabeth blinked, wondering what he had up his sleeve.

"Like what?" Enid asked.

"Want a ride to school?" Todd asked, placing his hand on the motorcycle seat.

"Really?" Enid's whole face lit up and Elizabeth's heart sunk. Perfect. Yet another girl who wasn't her riding on the back of Todd's motorcycle.

"Sure. I love showing this baby off," Todd said.

"Do you mind, Liz? If I ride with Todd instead?" Enid asked, practically glowing with excitement.

"Please. At least it'll spare you listening to Jessica whine all the way to school," Elizabeth said, trying to put on a brave face.

"Cool." Enid ran over to the bench to grab her stuff and came back with her book bag and gym bag. "Would you mind taking this to school for me? I don't think I can hold on to both," she said to Elizabeth, holding out her gym clothes.

Elizabeth gritted her teeth. "No problem."

Todd handed Enid the pink helmet, which she happily strapped on, then he waited on the bike while Enid climbed on behind him. Just the sight of her friend with her arms wrapped around her boyfriend's torso made Elizabeth squirm. She knew that Enid and Todd would never do anything, but it still felt weird. That was her torso to hug. No one else's.

"See you there?" Todd said to Liz, flipping his visor up for a kiss.

Elizabeth planted a quick kiss on his lips. "See you."

And then they were off, shooting down the street together like a happy little couple.

For a long moment, Elizabeth just stood there, clutching Enid's bag in her hands, listening to the fading sound of the bike's engine.

This is so unfair, she thought. Not only can I not be a part of this thing Todd loves, but it seems like every other girl in the world can and will.

Suddenly, the red Jeep she shared with Jessica pulled up right in front of her face. Jessica stared at her from the driver's seat.

"Earth to Liz!" she said, waving a hand. "Are we going to school today or what?"

Elizabeth hadn't even heard her sister start the car or back it toward her. Feeling like a moron, she jogged across the lawn for her bag, ran back, and climbed into the passenger seat without the smallest protest about the music or the top being down or anything. She was too distracted to care.

"You all right?" Jessica asked. "You look like you're about to hurl."

"I'm fine," Elizabeth muttered. "Let's just go."

"Whatever you say, Miss Moody," Jessica replied.

She zoomed out of the driveway and took off toward school, singing along with the radio. Elizabeth, meanwhile, stared out the side of the car, trying to squelch her sadness and jealousy. For the second day in a row, everyone in school would see the backseat of Todd's bike occupied by another girl. The thought really did make her want to hurl. But instead, she sat back, took some deep breaths, and did her best to blink back her tears as Jessica drove her to school.

## CHAPTER 5

"Liz!"

Speak of the devil..., Elizabeth thought, looking up to find Enid scurrying down the hall toward her, her hair

flattened from the weight of the helmet. Her friend was flushed and grinning, like she'd just won the lottery or something.

"Omigosh, Liz! That was so much fun!" Enid gasped.

Annoyed, Elizabeth checked her watch.

"What did you guys do? Take the scenic route down to the beach first?" she snapped, slamming her locker door.

"What's the matter?" Enid asked.

"Nothing. Here's your bag," Elizabeth said, holding out the small duffel. "I've got to get to homeroom."

She turned and hurried off, leaving her best friend stunned behind her. About two seconds later, she started to feel guilty, and about five seconds later, she was wishing that Enid was in her homeroom so she could explain. It wasn't Enid's fault. Elizabeth was just having a hard time dealing with the whole motorcycle thing--a harder time than she ever would have thought possible.

Throughout the day, Elizabeth felt moody and preoccupied. She tried unsuccessfully to focus in chemistry lab, and nearly blew the whole place up by mixing the wrong chemicals together. Then, when she was called on to conjugate a verb in Spanish, she did

great job--except for the fact that she conjugated the wrong word.

At least I have a free period today, Elizabeth thought as the bell rang and everyone gathered their things. Can't do too much damage in the Oracle office.

Maybe working on her column would help take her mind off Todd and Enid and which girl might be next to straddle Todd's bike. As she threaded her way through the crowded halls toward the Web site office, she glanced up only when Dana Larson said hello--and then wished she had kept her head down. It just so happened that she was passing the huge glass windows of the library at that moment, and she saw that Todd and Mandy were sitting at a table in the middle of the room, squished together as they both tried to read the screen on the same computer. Their legs were touching; their arms were touching. Mandy's hair was even grazing Todd's shoulder.

Elizabeth stopped so abruptly she nearly tripped herself. As her face burned with anger and embarrassment, she wished more than anything that she were more like her sister. Jessica would have stridden right through the doors with a grin, given Todd a kiss, and breezily asked how things were going with their project. She'd probably even loop her arm around Todd, effectively separating him and Mandy and reminding them both exactly who Todd belonged to.

Do it. Just do it, she told herself.

But she couldn't. It just wasn't her. So instead of claiming her territory, she turned and hurried down the hall as if she hadn't seen anything at all.

The Oracle office was empty, except for Mr. Collins, the faculty advisor for the Web site and one of Sweet Valley High's favorite teachers. He looked up from his newspaper and smiled as she walked in, and Elizabeth attempted to smile back. Mr. Collins, in a blue crewneck and jeans, looked especially crushworthy that day. It wasn't hard to see why practically every girl in school got butterflies whenever he walked into a room.

"Nice to see someone at this school feels like working," Mr. Collins commented.

"Actually, I'm way behind on my column, so don't be too proud," Elizabeth joked.

"Well, at least you can admit it," he said.

Elizabeth sat down at her usual computer and booted it up. Trying to look as carefree as possible, she tightened her blond ponytail and typed out "The Insider" and the date underneath it. Then nothing. All she could think about was Todd and that empty space on the back of his motorcycle. If she were a good gossip columnist, she'd

probably start with a bit about Todd's new wheels and the two girls who weren't his girlfriend who had already been spotted on the back. But she couldn't write that. She just couldn't.

"Writer's block?" Mr. Collins asked.

The proximity of his voice startled her, and she looked up to find him hovering right behind her. How long she had been catatonic, she had no idea, and her face flushed scarlet.

"I wish," she replied, leaning her elbow next to the keyboard, and her head in her hand.

Mr. Collins pulled out the chair next to hers and sat. "Want to talk about it?"

Not really, Elizabeth thought. But then ... maybe she should. Maybe if she ran the whole mess by a third-party observer, she could get some unbiased advice. Besides, Mr. Collins had always been there for her in the past. She took a deep breath and let out a sigh.

"You know, it's like on the surface, nothing's actually wrong, but then ... everything's wrong," she said, knowing she sounded certifiable.

"Ah. One of those," Mr. Collins said with a smirk. "Like you know logically that you shouldn't be upset, but you can't help feeling the way you feel."

"Exactly," Elizabeth replied.

"So what's up?" he asked, leaning back in the chair. "I minored in psych, you know. Let me put it to good use."

Elizabeth laughed, and then, bracing herself, she let the whole story pour out. She told him about Rex and his death. And Todd and his bike. And her inability to share it with him. And how it seemed like every other girl in school was just dying to step in where she couldn't.

"What if he decides he'd rather go out with someone who likes his stupid motorcycle as much as he does?" she mumbled, the very thought sending a painful shot through her heart.

"I can see why you might think that, but let me ask you something," Mr. Collins said. "Todd's a basketball player, right?"

"Yeah."

"So do you think he's only interested in dating girls who can shoot hoops?" he asked.

Elizabeth saw where he was going. "No."

"And what about you? Are you only ever going to go out with guys who read classic lit for fun?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Elizabeth laughed. "Urn, no. I'd probably never have a date again."

"So do you really think he might be interested in Mandy or Enid just because they enjoyed riding his bike?" Mr. Collins asked.

Suddenly, Elizabeth felt extremely silly. "No. Not when you put it that way, I guess."

"So there you go," Mr. Collins said. "My psych professors would be so proud."

"But that's just the thing," Elizabeth said, shifting in her seat to better face him. "I know how I feel is silly, but whenever I see one of them hanging on



to my boyfriend that way, I can't help being jealous. What's the matter with me?"

"I'd say ... nothing," Mr. Collins said, matter-of-factly. "I'd say you're a perfectly normal girl. It's totally normal to feel that way. You just have to keep reminding yourself that he may drive Mandy to the diner or Enid to school, but it's you he's looking for once he gets where he's going."

Elizabeth smiled. "True."

"I think it'll get better over time," he assured her. "You just have to get used to this new thing Todd has in his life. And that's all it is, Liz. It's a way to get from point A to point B. It's a toy--a novelty. The excitement is going to wear off eventually, for everyone. Are you really going to let that ruin your relationship?"

Elizabeth took a deep breath. She had never thought of it that way. "No," she said firmly. "I'm not."

"Good." He got up and pushed his chair back under the desk. "Now get to work already," he said lightly.

"I think I will," Elizabeth said, smiling.

"Thank God," Mr. Collins said. "Because I, for one, am dying to know what's going on around here."

Elizabeth laughed and turned back toward her desk. Feeling lighter and more awake than she had all day, she started to type.

A certain double-varsity-letter athlete has a new set of wheels--two of them, to be exact. And not only is he using them to get around town, but we hear he even rode in to break up a fight at the newly refurbished Valley Diner....

Twenty minutes later, Elizabeth's column was done and she filed it in the general server on the computer.

"All set," she said to Mr. Collins as the bell rang. She lifted her messenger bag strap over her head and smiled. "Thanks for curing my writer's block."

"Anytime," he said as he clicked open the file. "Good luck with everything, Liz."

"Thanks," Elizabeth said. "I think I'm gonna be okay." Now all I have to do is apologize to Enid, she thought as she headed to lunch. And maybe I can still save this day.

Elizabeth arrived at the cafeteria early. She had already gone through the line and claimed a table on the outdoor patio by the time Enid came around, her plate piled high with the day's special--rubbery-looking macaroni and cheese. Enid sat down across from Elizabeth, looking almost timid.

"Hey," Elizabeth said, gearing up for her apology. "I'm really sorry about this morning."

Enid's shoulders relaxed a bit. "Yeah. What was that about? You weren't mad at me for taking Todd up on his offer, were you?"

"No. Of course not," Elizabeth said automatically.

"Are you sure?" Enid asked as she shook up her bottle of iced tea. "Because for a second at your locker, I thought you were Jessica."

"I'm sorry, Enid. I didn't mean it. I wasn't mad at you. I guess I'm still just freaked out about the whole motorcycle thing."

"Okay. Because, I mean, I know how you feel about it

and everything, but I always kind of thought it would be fun, so when he asked,

I--"

"It's okay. Really," Elizabeth interrupted, not wanting to dwell on the episode any longer. "No apology necessary. I'm glad you had fun."

"Really," Enid said, eyeing her dubiously.

"I swear! I'm just in a weird mood," Elizabeth replied, taking a bite of her sandwich.

"Want to talk about it?" Enid asked.

"Not really. Actually, it would be really cool if we could talk about basically anything else," Elizabeth said hopefully.

"Okay. What about Spanish?" Enid asked, spearing a few curls of macaroni with her plastic fork. "Wanna study for the quiz together on Thursday?"

"Sure."

Elizabeth was temporarily distracted as she saw Jessica and Lila crossing the patio with their trays and she remembered Jessica's obsession with Enid's cousin Brian. Jess had practically ruptured something on the ride to school when she'd heard that Elizabeth had yet to ask Enid about it. Liz figured she might as well bring it up then. If she waited too long, Jessica might try approaching Enid about it herself, and that would not go over well.

"Hey, Enid. I have a favor to ask," Elizabeth began.

"What's up?" Enid wiped her mouth with her napkin.

"Do you think you could set up Brian and Jessica for your party?" Elizabeth asked quickly, then held her breath.

Enid stared at her, as if waiting for the punch line. "You have got to be kidding me," she said finally.

"Actually, I'm not," Elizabeth said. "Come on. It's only one night. And Brian would have a great time with Jessica."

"I'm sure he would. What guy wouldn't?" Enid said wryly. "But there's no way I'm subjecting a family member to Jessica Wakefield. Not after what she did to me."

Elizabeth took a deep breath and leaned her arms on the table. "I know it was awful. I do. But it all worked out for the best in the end, right? At least you found out what Ronnie was really like before you guys got too serious. And you're with George now."

Enid snorted a laugh. "That is so not the point. I spent hours crying alone in my room. Everyone was talking about me. It was the worst few weeks of my life. And Jessica never even said she was sorry. Besides, I thought she was going out with Danny Stauffer."

"I don't think she's that serious about him," Elizabeth mumbled miserably. Especially after he didn't stand up for himself at the diner, she added silently.

"Well, Brian's not going to be her next distraction," Enid said firmly. "I'm sorry."

Elizabeth had known this was going to happen, but it didn't stop her from wanting to make one final pitch. She was about to try again when Todd rushed over and planted a hasty kiss on her temple.

"Hey, Liz. Enid," he said, adjusting the strap of his backpack on his shoulder.

"Hey! What's the rush?" Elizabeth asked.

"I have a lot to do," he replied. "I just came over to say hi before I grab some food. I've gotta get back to the library."

Elizabeth's heart sank as she thought of the last time she had seen him in the library. But she forced the feeling aside. "The project?"

"What else?" he said, rolling his eyes. "It's been harder than we expected. I'm so sorry, but Mandy and Winston are waiting for me up there. We really have to narrow-down our focus."

"It's okay. I get it," Elizabeth said.

"Cool. I'll see you guys later," Todd said. Then he gave Elizabeth's hand a squeeze before running off to join the lunch line.

Enid watched him go before turning back to Elizabeth, who was staring into space, trying not to think about Mandy Farmer. At least Winston would be with them. No atmosphere had ever been romantic with Winston "Goofball" Egbert around.

"Hey. Are you all right?" Enid asked her.

"Yeah. Fine. Why?" Elizabeth said, snapping to.

"You went all white when Todd mentioned the project," Enid said, looking concerned. "You're not, like, jealous of Mandy or something, are you?"

Elizabeth sighed, feeling foolish. "Kind of?"

"What? Why? It's just a school project," Enid said.

"I know! I know this," Elizabeth said. "It's just. .. it's the stupid motorcycle."

"Okay. Now I'm confused," Enid said. "What about the motorcycle?"

"He drove Mandy to the Valley Diner on it yesterday and everyone saw them. And then you this morning... That's why I snapped at you," Elizabeth admitted, avoiding eye contact. "I was jealous."

"Of me?" Enid asked, baffled.

"No. Not really. Not of you. Not in that way. I mean, I know you would never try to snag Todd or anything. I was just jealous of the fact that Todd has this thing that you and everyone else can share with him that I can't," Elizabeth said, putting her head in her hands. "God, I am such a loser. What is wrong with me?"

"Liz, I'm so sorry. If I'd known, I swear I would have turned him down," Enid said in a rush.

"Please! That's just it! You didn't do anything wrong," Elizabeth said, feeling desperate. "It's the bike. I'm letting this dumb bike come between me and Todd. I just wish he had never bought the stupid thing. I wish everything could just go back to normal."

## CHAPTER 6

Elizabeth closed her locker and found Guy Chesney leaning against the wall, his hands shoved into the front pockets of his baggy, beat-up jeans.

"I guess," she said. "Seems like that's what everyone else is doing."

"Cool," Guy said with a smile. "Well, do you want a ride? I just saw Jessica take off with Cara, and Todd mentioned something about you not riding with him, so ..."

Elizabeth swallowed the lump in her throat at the thought of Todd advertising the fact that she wasn't

getting on the back of his bike. It was the truth, after all. Why shouldn't he be allowed to talk about it?

"Yeah. Thanks," Elizabeth said with a smile. "It's better than taking the downtown bus, right?"

"I hope so," Guy said with a laugh.

They started down the hallway together, Elizabeth struggling with her huge pile of books. Guy, as always, was carrying nothing but his guitar case. Elizabeth wasn't sure if she'd ever seen him with more than a notebook in his hand. How did he manage to pass any of his classes?

"Want me to take those for you?" he offered, his long brown hair falling forward.

"That's all right. I've got it," Elizabeth said. "So, how's everything with Valley of Death?"

"Good," Guy replied, nodding. His whole lanky body seemed to bob when he moved his head. "I've been working on some new songs and Dana's

actually been seeing a vocal coach, so she has this whole new register we can work with."

"That's great," Elizabeth said, righting her English anthology before it could slide off the stack. "I'm glad you guys didn't split up over that whole manager thing."

"Yeah, well, I guess that wasn't our big break after all," Guy said with a good-natured shrug.

"Don't worry. It's coming," Elizabeth assured him.

"Sooner or later you guys'll be on the cover of Rotting Stone. Maybe I'll even get to write the article," she joked.

Guy grinned as he shoved open the front door and held it for her. "That'd be cool. I never really thanked you for all those pieces you wrote about us for The Oracle."

"Not a problem. It's kind of my job."

"Still. I thought it was really cool of you. And it totally helped. We might have been playing to empty houses if it wasn't for the free publicity you gave us," Guy said, looking her in the eye.

Elizabeth smiled in return, but for some reason, she was starting to feel oddly off-kilter. The way Guy was looking at her, all his polite gestures... Was something going on that she didn't know about? They arrived at Guy's Subaru Outback, the trunk and rear seat of which were packed with amps, mixing boards, and random equipment.

"Wow. You take that stuff with you everywhere?" Elizabeth asked as he opened the passenger-side door for her.

"We have rehearsal later," he said. "I'm headed over to Max's after I grab some food."

Elizabeth placed her books on the floor of the front seat, then climbed in. Guy closed the door for her and whistled as he walked around to the driver's



side. He was

so much more relaxed and confident than he'd been the last time she'd talked to him-nothing like the tightly wound, nervous musician who was ready to explode anytime one of his group members hit a wrong note.

Guy got in and started the car. He steered out of the parking lot with his left hand while he rested his right arm atop the back edge of the front seat--very close to the back of Liz's neck. The silence started to make her tense, so as he pulled onto Main, she decided to try to make some small talk.

"So, you're playing Enid's party, right?" she asked.

Guy nodded. "That's our next gig. You and Todd going together?"

"Yep. As always." Elizabeth looked out the window, watching the other cars roll by.

"Lucky man," Guy said jovially.

"What do you mean?" Elizabeth asked, glancing at him.

"Just that he's lucky to have a girl like you."

Elizabeth blushed. "Oh. Thanks," she said, feeling awkward.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." As long as it's not what I'm doing Friday night, she thought.

"What's the deal? I mean, why aren't you riding with him?"

Elizabeth's stomach tightened. He was only about the

eighth person who had asked her that question that day, and she was getting tired of explaining herself. Besides, it wasn't as if she and Guy were best friends. It was none of his business.

"Personal reasons," she said tersely.

Guy glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "Sounds like you're not too happy about it."

Elizabeth squirmed as they came to a red light, and she wished that it would change already and shorten the drive.

"I'm fine."

"Well, just so you know ... if you ever need a ride anywhere, let me know," Guy said. He let his arm slip a little, just enough so that it rested on Elizabeth's shoulder. "I'm there."

Elizabeth sat forward and picked up her bag, feigning a sudden need for Chap Stick. "I'll be fine," she said. "I do have a car."

"Just saying," Guy replied as the light turned green.

Soon Elizabeth could no longer think of a reason to be sitting forward and she had to lean back again. The second she did, Guy's hand clasped her shoulder.

"A car can be a lot more fun than a motorcycle," he said suggestively.

Ew. Elizabeth thought. "Thanks, but no thanks," she

said firmly. She reached back, lifted his hand, and placed it on the center console.

"Whatever you say," Guy said, seemingly unperturbed by her rejection.

Finally, the Valley Diner came into view and Elizabeth unbuckled her seat belt before Guy even pulled into the parking lot. Suddenly, she couldn't get out of his car fast enough. She was more than relieved when she saw that Todd was already there, leaning against his bike, waiting for her.

"Thanks for the ride," she blurted out, swinging the door open. She managed to gather all her stuff in record time and slammed the door with her leg before Guy even killed the engine.

"Hey!" she said to Todd, feeling flustered by what had just transpired. Todd must have immediately read her expression, because he stood up straight and his eyes flicked past her toward Guy.

"What's wrong?" he asked, reaching for her. He put one hand on her waist in a comforting way and slipped her books from her arms with the other.

"Nothing. Nothing," she said, giving him a quick kiss. "I'm just glad to see you."

"You sure?" he asked, eyeing Guy suspiciously. "You look upset. How'd you end up with Guy?"

"Jessica forgot about me, as always," Elizabeth explained. "Come on. Let's just go inside. I'm starved."

Truthfully, she felt seminaixseated after Guy's too-forward signals, but she just wanted to forget about the whole thing. Inside, Elizabeth and Todd snagged a booth for two and settled in. Todd ordered a burger and root beer and Elizabeth said she would have the same. After making small talk for a few minutes, she sat back and blew out a sigh.

"Okay. What's really going on?" Todd asked her. "What were you doing in Chesney's car?"

"Nothing," Elizabeth protested, toying with the salt-shaker. "I told you. He offered me a ride. How else was I supposed to get here?"

"Well, I don't like it," Todd muttered, taking a sip of his water.

"Don't like what?" Elizabeth asked.

"Seeing you in a car with another guy," he said, looking at her directly.

Elizabeth's eyes widened. "Oh. My. God. You're jealous!"

"No, I'm not," Todd said as their food arrived.

"You so are!" Elizabeth said gleefully. "Look at you! You're all red."

Todd shook his head and snorted. "All right, all right. Will you keep it down? Maybe I am, a little. But why do you have to be so happy about it?"

Elizabeth giggled. "Sorry, I just ... I think one of those cartoon lightbulbs just went on over my head."

"Okay," Todd said grumpily.

"No! It's just, you made me see how insane I've been the past couple of days," Elizabeth said, taking a bite of her burger.

"Insane? About what?" Todd asked, his brown eyes puzzled.

"About that thing out there." Elizabeth gestured at the window and his bike parked outside.

"You mean my bike? I thought we already cleared that up," he said.

"I thought so too, until I saw you driving Mandy around. And then Enid this morning."

Todd looked at Elizabeth, his brow creased in confusion. Then, suddenly, understanding lit his eyes.

"Are you trying to tell me you were jealous too?" he said. He laughed. "You have to be kidding me. Like anyone could ever come close to you. You should know better."

Elizabeth's heart warmed. "And you should know I'd never go for Guy Chesney," she said, wrinkling her nose. "All I did was catch a ride with him."

"And all Mandy and Enid did was catch a ride with me," Todd said.

"I know. But when I saw Mandy holding on to you

yesterday, I couldn't help thinking that you liked that feeling--and that if I couldn't be on the back of your bike, then eventually you'd find someone who could."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Todd asked, popping a fry into his mouth.

"I didn't want to sound like a psycho, demanding girlfriend," Elizabeth admitted.

"Well, you don't," he said. "And I don't want you to be afraid to talk to me about anything. Ever. Okay?"

"Okay," Elizabeth said with a smile.

"And now that I know that it bothers you, I won't offer any more rides to other girls," Todd said resolutely.

"Todd, you don't have to--"

"I know I don't have to. It's what I want to do," he said. "You're the only person I really want on the back of my bike, and if I can't have you there, no one else will be there either. From now on, that empty seat is reserved. Even if you can't use it, it still belongs to you."

"Todd," Elizabeth said. "That's so sweet."

"I know," Todd joked, shrugging. He grabbed his burger and took a big bite. "Anyway, if you were worried about Mandy and me, you can forget it."

He pointed to one of the corner booths, where Mandy was sitting with Winston Egbert. The two of them were lost in their own little world, feeding each other french fries. Elizabeth's jaw dropped.

"When did that happen?" she asked.

"We chose a save-the-whales charity for our project, and apparently they've both been obsessed with the cause since, like, kindergarten," Todd explained. "They've been all over each other ever since they figured out how much they have in common. It's kind of gross, actually."

"But cute," Elizabeth said as Winston gave Mandy a smooch. Liz stood up and leaned over the table to lay one on Todd as well. "Thanks for being jealous."

Todd smiled as she sat down again. "Anytime."

## CHAPTER 7

"Hey," Elizabeth said. "What's up?"

"Not much. Just wondering if you're planning on leading with your own gossip in next week's Insider," Enid said teasingly.

"My own gossip? What do you mean?" Elizabeth asked.

"Just that you and Todd were so mesmerized by each other at the diner this afternoon you were, like, in another world," Enid said.

Elizabeth blushed and laughed. "You were there?"

"See? You didn't even see me!" Enid said accusingly, cracking up laughing.

Elizabeth put down her pen and sat back in her desk chair, using her foot to push off the floor and twirl around. "Well, you could have joined us," she said. "We were just celebrating the realization that I'm not completely out of my mind."

"That's good to hear," Enid said sincerely. "I don't mind you being a little insane, but completely insane could put a strain on our friendship."

"Gee, thanks," Elizabeth said sarcastically.

"So you're cool with the bike?" Enid asked.

Elizabeth braced her hand on her desk to stop all the spinning. "I'm cool with it. It's just a way to get from point A to point B and it has no effect on my relationship with Todd whatsoever."

"Nice. I like it," Enid said. "So, listen, have you talked to Jessica about Brian?"

"Yeah. I told her," Elizabeth said with a private grimace. "She didn't take it too well."

"Hissy fit?" Enid asked.

"Actually, no. It was kind of subdued," Elizabeth replied. "But she didn't eat a thing at dinner."

"Well, I hope there are leftovers, because I've kind of changed my mind," Enid said. "I think I will set them up."

"Really?" Elizabeth said, sitting up straight in shock. "Why?"

"I don't know. I was telling George about what happened and he's all about the forgive-and-forget approach," Enid said. "He kind of made me feel like I was being spiteful, which basically sucked. So I thought about it and I realized that you were right-Brian would probably have fun with Jessica. Do I really want to deprive him of that just because I'm still mad at her?"

"Wow. That's very mature of you," Elizabeth said, impressed. "You sound like you're on Oprah or something."

Enid laughed. "I guess."

"This is so cool of you, Enid," Elizabeth said. "I can't wait to tell Jessica. She's going to freak."

"Speaking of freaking...", Enid said. "You should have seen my mother this afternoon. I thought she was going to pop a major artery over the flower arrangements for the party."

"She's kind of stressed, huh?" Elizabeth asked.

"It's getting worse by the minute," Enid lamented. "She's obsessing over every detail. The tablecloths, the music, the lighting, the favors. It's literally all she can



talk about. And I've been trying to get into it, but I just can't. It is so not my thing."

"Just think, in a week it'll all be over," Elizabeth said.

"I know. I just..."

"What?" Elizabeth asked, concerned by the dark tone of her friend's voice.

"I just get the feeling that this stupid party is more important to her than I am," Enid said quietly. "It's more like she's throwing this thing for herself, not for me. And when I try to tell her to chill, that it's not that important, she says I'm ungrateful. It really sucks."

"Yeah. That doesn't sound like fun," Elizabeth said, getting up to pace her room. She always thought better when she was on the move. "Maybe she's just getting carried away because you're her only daughter."

"Maybe," Enid said. "What's really insane is, I feel guilty. I mean, why does she even want to throw me some gala event after everything I put her through?"

Elizabeth bit her lip. Enid was referring to the drug and alcohol problems she'd beaten a couple of years back. It wasn't something Enid liked to talk about, so Elizabeth knew she must be really upset even to bring it up.

"That's the thing, Enid," Elizabeth said gently. "I bet this party is your mom's way of showing you how proud

she is of you. I mean, look how far you've come! A couple years ago she probably didn't even think you'd get to your sweet sixteen in one piece. Now you're a straight-A student. She probably just wants to show you off."

"You think?" Enid asked hopefully.

"Totally. I bet she just wants it to be perfect for you and that's why she's stressing."

"I never thought of it that way," Enid said, sounding a bit more upbeat. "You know what? If she wants to throw me the party of the century, I should just let her."

"Exactly," Elizabeth replied.

"Fine. I will. But I am not getting stressed about it like her," Enid said firmly. "We had an hour-long conversation about whether to do lilies or roses in the centerpieces. An hour!"

"Oooh. What did you decide?" Elizabeth asked.

"Lilies," Enid answered. "Like I even care. Either would be beautiful."

"Well, I would have gone with lilies too, if it makes you feel any better," Elizabeth said with a smile.

"Thanks. Oh! My mom's knocking on my door. Probably something about whether to get the milk or dark chocolate fountain. I'd better go," Enid said. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck!" Elizabeth trilled.

She hung up the phone and heard her sister banging around in her bedroom. Now seemed as good a time as any to share the happy news--before her twin broke something in there. She dropped her phone onto the bed, walked through their shared bathroom, and knocked on the door to Jessica's room.

"Come in!" Jessica shouted, sounding stressed herself.

"Hey, Jess," Elizabeth said as she entered. She had to kick aside a large pile of clothing just to get through the door.

"I never should have tried that new shampoo," Jessica said, frowning in the mirror above her dresser as she brushed through her long blond hair. "I look all mousy."

"So just use mine tomorrow," Elizabeth said. "And you'll have plenty of time to switch back before Enid's party."

"Like I even want to go to that loser fest now," Jessica grumbled.

Elizabeth smirked and sat on the edge of Jessica's unmade bed. "Oh really? But Brian is going to be so disappointed!"

"What?" Jessica asked, freezing in place.

"Oh, I just talked to Enid," Elizabeth said blithely. "She said she decided to fix you two up after all."

"What!" Jessica exclaimed, her entire face lighting up.

She threw her brush down and whirled around to face Elizabeth. "She actually changed her mind?"

"She decided to take the high road and forgive and forget," Elizabeth explained.

"Omigod! This is so awesome!" Jessica gushed. "You have to help me figure out what to wear. Something sophisticated and sexy, but not too sexy. I don't want him to get the wrong idea like the last college jerk I dated."

Jessica dove into her closet and started whipping out dresses and skirts. There wasn't much in there, however, considering half her wardrobe was strewn all over her bedroom floor, along with dozens of pairs of shoes that had been accumulating since junior high. Another pile of clothes was draped over Jessica's desk chair, and bags full of stuff stuck out from under the bed. Elizabeth had no idea how Jessica ever found anything in this mess.

"Nothing," Jessica said, stepping out of the closet with her hands on her hips. She surveyed the array of stuff at her feet and all around her room--enough clothing to fill an entire mall. "Absolutely nothing."

"You can always borrow something of mine," Elizabeth offered, feeling generous after her lovey-dovey afternoon with Todd and her positive conversation with Enid.

"Thanks," Jessica said, distracted. "Where's my phone? I should really call Danny while I'm thinking of it."

"What for?" Elizabeth asked.

"To tell him I don't need him to take me to Enid's party," Jessica said, lifting up one of the pillows on her bed in search of her cell.

Elizabeth's heart skipped a beat. "Wait. You were already going with Danny?"

"Liz, it's not like I could show up there without a date," Jessica said, rolling her eyes as she continued her search. "The invitation said 'plus one.' How would it look if I didn't have a plus one?"

"But I thought you broke up with him after that Valley Diner thing," Elizabeth said.

Not that she had agreed with the decision-there weren't many guys in school who would risk getting pulverized by Crunch McAllister by egging him on-but Jessica had felt that the whole thing was just too humiliating for words.

"Did I say that?" Jessica asked, blinking her blue-green eyes innocently. "Oh, well. Now, thanks to Enid, I don't have to get back together with him." Jessica dropped to the floor to disentangle her messenger bag from a sweater sleeve. "Speaking of getting back together, did you hear that Bruce Patman has been hinting about asking me out again?"

Elizabeth gripped the comforter next to her hip. "Who told you that and why do you sound so excited?"

"Cara, and I'm not," Jessica said, finally pulling her cell out of her bag. "I just think it's highly amusing."

Considering the self-satisfied gleam in her sister's eyes, Elizabeth wasn't so sure that was all there was to it. After the awful way Bruce had treated Jessica during their intense but brief relationship, Elizabeth assumed her

sister would never want to have anything to do with him again. But maybe the crush Jessica had always had on Bruce hadn't been totally uncrushed.

Bruce, Danny, Brian. How does this girl do it? Elizabeth wondered.

"What are you going to tell Danny?" she asked Jessica as Jess powered up her phone. It beeped ten times, indicating missed texts and calls. Sometimes Elizabeth wondered if Jessica's friends had time to do anything other than text and gab on their cells.

"Oh, I'll think of something," Jessica said, sitting on the floor and leaning back against the bed to check her messages. "Oh! Perfect!" she exclaimed as she read the tiny screen.

"What?" Elizabeth asked.

"I got a text from Cara, and she says Danny and Julie Porter were getting all flirty at Casa tonight. If I set them up, then I won't even have to worry about it," she said. "Maybe I'll call Julie first and get her to ask Danny to

Enid's. Then when I call him to dump him, he'll already have a backup."

Elizabeth felt like she'd just gotten whiplash. "Your mind works in mysterious ways," she told her sister, amused.

"I know! Doesn't it?" Jessica said happily. She pushed herself up off the ground and pocketed the phone. "Come on. Let's go see what you have in your closet." She reached for Elizabeth's arm and yanked her off the bed.

"Sure," Elizabeth agreed.

At that moment, Elizabeth wouldn't have minded if Jessica wiped out her entire closet. For a day that had gotten off to a bad start, things were definitely looking up for everyone. Enid had George and was going to back off her mother. Mandy had Winston instead of Todd. Jessica had Brian. And now it looked like Julie Porter was going to have Danny Stauffer.

Plus Elizabeth was more positive than ever that she and Todd were meant to be. Enid's party was going to be amazing. She could hardly wait.



## CHAPTER 8

waitresses in white vests circulated around the room with silver platters full of hors d'oeuvres and sparkling cider. The effect was simply beautiful.

"Wow. I feel like I'm at an Oscar party in L.A. or something," Elizabeth said, feeling underdressed in her simple black sheath.

"Oh, please. It's a floral nightmare," Jessica replied, crossing her arms over her chest. "Are there any stems left anywhere in SoCal?"

"My aunt loves flowers," Brian told her. "I think she did an amazing job."

Elizabeth smirked as Jessica blushed in embarrassment. Apparently, she had spaced on the fact that her date was related to the hostess of the party.

"Well, yeah ... they are pretty," Jessica said quickly. "Actually, when you take in the room as a whole, you're right... the effect is stunning."

"Not as stunning as you," Brian said, smiling down at Jessica.

Gag, Elizabeth thought automatically. Such a line.

But he did have a point. After much searching, Jessica had finally found the perfect outfit for the party—a black beaded halter top and wide-leg silk pants she'd borrowed from their mother. Her gleaming blond hair was pulled back and she wore long silver earrings that almost

grazed her shoulders. Compared with their friends, who were flitting about the room in cute dresses or skirts and tops, Jessica looked truly sophisticated. Plus she had on her arm a six-foot-two, blond-haired hottie who totally complemented her. Together they looked like a walking, talking Ralph Lauren ad. Elizabeth only hoped Jessica would remember to thank Enid for changing her mind.

"Why don't we chase down one of those waiters?" Brian suggested. "I'm starved."

"I could go for a crab cake," Jessica agreed as Brian took her hand. "You coming, Liz?"

"I think I'll just wait here for Todd," Elizabeth said, glancing behind her. "He should be here soon."

"Okay. If I don't see you, just find us at the end of the night and we'll give you a ride to the club," Jessica said. After a little prodding, Jessica had agreed to let Liz horn in on her date again later, when the country club emptied out and everyone headed to Caravan--a downtown club--for the after-party. Todd, after all, would not be able to take her.

"Thanks," Elizabeth said.

"Even though I don't understand why Todd couldn't have taken his car for one night," Jessica added pointedly.

"Do we really have to talk about this again?" Elizabeth

asked. "He's trying to sell it. He doesn't want to put more miles on it now."

"Whatever. Have fun! I'll see you later!" Jessica called as she and Brian turned and disappeared into the whirl of partygoers and waiters.

After about two minutes, Elizabeth started to feel awkward standing in the entryway alone, so she wandered outside. It was a warm night, so she decided to wait for Todd under the grand pillars out front and watch the cars as they pulled up to the valet stand. From her vantage point, she saw nearly everyone from school arrive: Cara, Ken, Lila, Bruce, Winston, Mandy, Caroline Pearce, Tom McKay, John Pfeiffer. It was like a yearbook parade. And soon she heard Valley of Death take the stage inside and launch into their first song. The party was already picking up, and still no sign of Todd.

She reached into her small clutch purse to check her phone and see if he'd tried to call her. Nothing. Suddenly, her pulse started to race.



He's just running late after his grandfather's party, Elizabeth thought. There's nothing to worry about.

Still, she decided to head back inside. At least she would be distracted. Standing there watching the driveway wasn't helping her nerves.

"I've been looking all over for you!" Enid exclaimed,

grabbing Elizabeth's wrists the moment she was through the door.

Elizabeth's jaw dropped. "Enid! You look incredible," she said. Enid was wearing the dark blue strapless dress Elizabeth had helped her pick out, and for once her dark hair was pulled back from her face, showing off her eyes and cheekbones.

"Thanks. You think?" Enid said, looking down at her dress as she blushed.

"Stunning," Elizabeth said, borrowing Jessica's word. "Are you having fun?"

"Definitely! I can't believe how many people are here," Enid said, looking around, her eyes sparkling. "I feel like Cinderella or something."

"Good. I'm glad it all worked out," Elizabeth told her.

"So, are you okay? I saw you come in with Jessica and Brian," Enid said, lowering her voice. "Todd's still coming, right?"

"Oh, yeah," Elizabeth said casually. "I'm sure he just got hung up at his grandfather's party."

And that he's not lying unconscious on the road somewhere, she added silently.

"Well, don't just stand around. Go check out the food," Enid suggested. "My mom really outdid herself."

"Any caviar?" Elizabeth joked.

"No, thank God." Enid laughed. "But there are these

amazing shrimp and these cheese things that are to die for. Oh! And fries in truffle oil. They're totally addictive. You have to try some."

"I'll get right on that," Elizabeth agreed.

"Oh! My mother's flagging me down," Enid said, jumping up to her tiptoes. "I have to go say hello to some relatives. I'll catch up with you later?"

"Sounds good," Elizabeth said. "Happy birthday, Enid," she added, giving her friend a hug.

"Thanks!" Enid ran off to join her mother on the other side of the room.

Left alone, Elizabeth checked her watch. Todd was more than forty-five minutes late. Where could he be? And why hadn't he called? She found a quiet corner, pulled out her cell, and speed-dialed him, but it rang four times and went to voice mail. Not wanting to sound like a nagging girlfriend, she decided not to leave a message. At the very least he would see he'd missed a call from her and hopefully he'd call her back.

In the meantime, Elizabeth decided to distract herself and have a little fun. She tried the fries, which were every bit as yum as Enid had proclaimed them to be. Then she found Robin, Allen, Winston, and Mandy on the dance floor and joined them for a few songs. Every once in a while, she checked the door, but Todd was never there. Before long, dinner was served and Elizabeth found

herself sitting next to an empty chair with Todd's place card in front of it.

"Wilkins stand you up, Wakefield?" Bruce joked as he strolled by her table.

Right about then, her fear started to be tamped down by annoyance. Elizabeth looked around at her friends at the table and tried not to appear as hurt, worried, and irritated as she felt. She had been looking forward to Enid's party for weeks, and now the whole night had a negative twist,

thanks to Todd. He'd practically missed the whole thing already. If he showed up now, he'd basically be there for the cake and the goodbyes.

But he didn't even make it for that. Before long, the "Happy Birthday" song had been sung, the exquisite cake had been devoured, and all the SVH students were crowding toward the door. Elizabeth hovered near Enid as Enid hugged every last guest goodbye. When the place was practically empty, Enid turned to Elizabeth with an expression of pity that made Liz feel even worse.

"He never showed?" Enid asked.

"He never showed," Elizabeth said, hugging her bare arms.

"Well, I'm sure he has a good reason," Enid assured her. "I mean, it's Todd."

"I know. But then why hasn't he called me?" Elizabeth asked, annoyed.

"Maybe he'll go straight to the Caravan," George suggested, sauntering over with Enid's jacket. "Do you want a ride?"

"No thanks. I'm going with Jessica and Brian." Elizabeth glanced around the room and saw no sign of her sister. "She's probably just in the bathroom with Cara and Lila, primping. I'll meet you guys there."

"Okay," Enid said, giving Liz a quick hug.

As her friend walked out of the room with George's arm around her shoulders, Elizabeth felt an acute pang of jealousy. Why couldn't her boyfriend be there? No one was four hours late for a party. Something had to be wrong. And if something wasn't wrong, she was going to have to kill him.

Suddenly, her cell phone trilled. Heart in her throat, Elizabeth yanked it from her bag and was relieved to see Todd's face smiling at her from the screen. Relieved one second, and livid the next.

"Todd! Where are you?" she demanded by way of greeting.

"Liz, I am so, so, so, so sorry," Todd began. "There was something I had to do and I really didn't think it would take this long."

"Oh really? What did you have to do on the night of my best friend's sweet sixteen?" Elizabeth asked. "You promised her you'd be here!"

"I know. I suck," Todd said. "I really am sorry. But I actually think you're going to be happy when you find out."

"Find out what?" Elizabeth demanded, gripping the phone.

"It's a surprise," Todd told her with a smile in his voice.

It was all Elizabeth could do to keep from hurling the phone across the room. He was happy right now? Happy?

"Todd, you have to tell me where you've been all night," she said. "I've been freaking out over here."

"Look, I'm on my way," Todd said. "I'll be there in a few and I'll explain everything. Bye!"

Todd hung up before Elizabeth had a chance to ask him if he even knew what time it was--if he knew that everyone had already left for the Caravan. She tried to call him back, but again it went directly to voice mail. He was avoiding her call. All she could do was hope that when he said he'd be right there, he meant the country club and not the Caravan.

"I am so going to kill him," Elizabeth said under her breath as she stormed across the ballroom toward the door.

But at least now she knew he was all right. That took a load off her mind. She no longer had to be worried and angry. Just angry.

For the second time that night, Elizabeth found herself waiting outside. Pretty much everyone had cleared out, and it was now obvious that Jessica had forgotten about her and had already taken off with Brian. She left her sister a message, telling her to get her butt back to the country club and pick her up; then she stood there with clenched teeth, wondering if there was

anyone in Sweet Valley she could trust anymore. At least her wait was a short one this time. Less than ten minutes after he'd called, Todd roared up the drive on his motorcycle. He pulled his helmet off and Elizabeth was once again struck by how cute he was. Annoyingly cute.

"Everyone gone?" he asked.

"Looks that way," Elizabeth said coolly.

"How're you getting to the Caravan?" he asked, swinging his leg over his bike as Elizabeth slowly descended the stairs.

"Jessica is coming back for me," she said, with more confidence than she felt.

Todd smirked. "She's got Brian all to herself right now and you expect her to come back for you?"

Elizabeth shrugged, even though he had a point. "Whatever. Enid's mom said she'd drive me after the cleanup if Jessica didn't come through. So, what's the deal, Todd? Where have you been all night?"

Todd's expression grew serious. "Well, I've been thinking a lot about us, and about the bike, and I've come to a decision," he said. "But before I say anything, I just think you should know that this was the toughest decision I've ever had to make."

He looked her in the eye and Elizabeth's heart hit her toes. Holy crap. He's breaking up with me! He's breaking up with me over his stupid bike! That must have been his reason for bailing on the party. He didn't want to have to act all lovey-dovey all night when he knew he was going to dump her at the end of it.

"What is it?" Elizabeth asked, trying to hold her chin up. All she really wanted to do was burst into tears. Or punch him in the face. Or both. "Just say it."

"Okay, I guess I should just say it," he said, nervously shifting his feet.

I don't believe this. I don't believe he's doing this.

"I'm selling my bike."

Elizabeth almost fell over from shock. "What?"

"I'm getting rid of it," Todd said. "And don't try to change my mind."

"I.. . I..."

"That's where I've been all night. I made a deal with Crunch McAllister. I would have been here sooner, but he insisted on celebrating. Kept pouring me sodas while he chugged beer. That guy can really drink, man."

"You're selling the bike?" Elizabeth asked, just catching up.

"I told you, don't try to talk me out of it," Todd said.

Elizabeth stepped forward and hugged Todd so hard she nearly knocked them both off their feet.

"Are you okay?" he asked, brushing a stray lock of hair away from her face.

"I thought you were breaking up with me!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

Todd's face went slack. "What? No. Liz, come on. You've gotta be kidding me. No. I just... I can't stand having to meet you places and I can't stand watching you go home with other people. Not to mention you having to depend on Jessica of all people, which clearly isn't working out," he added, looking back at the empty driveway. "It just isn't worth it. I want to be with you, even if it is in my crappy car."

Elizabeth laughed. She was clutching his jacket at the sides. "But you always dreamed of having a bike."

"I know. I know. I always thought if I got one of these, it would be the best thing that ever happened to me," Todd said, turning to the side so that they could both see the Ducati. "But you know what? You're the best thing that's

ever happened to me. I'm not going to let some stupid bike get in the way of that."

Elizabeth giggled happily. "You're such a dork."

"I know," he replied with a shrug. "But it's your fault. I was way cooler before you turned me to mush."

Looking up into his brown eyes, Elizabeth was overwhelmed by her feelings for him. She couldn't believe he was actually going to give up his dream bike for her. She felt as if they had just taken their relationship to a whole new level. Clearly, Todd would do anything for her, and she felt at that moment that she would do anything for him, too.

"I love you; you know that?" she said.

Todd smiled slowly. "I love you, too."

Elizabeth was about to pull Todd in for a kiss when she heard footsteps behind her. She turned to find Enid's mother walking toward them.

"Sorry to interrupt, dear, but it looks like I won't be able to give you a ride after all," Ms. Rollins said. "I'm going to be here much longer than I thought. Is there someone you can call?"

"Sure, Ms. Rollins. Don't worry about it," Elizabeth told her. "I'll figure something out."

"All right, then," Enid's mother said. She hurried back inside, looking hassled.

"Who're you gonna call?" Todd asked, pulling his phone from his pocket. "Want me to get Ken to come back? Or Winston?"

Elizabeth looked past Todd at the motorcycle. Soon it would no longer be part of Todd's life, or hers. And suddenly, knowing that, she didn't think it looked quite so menacing. For the first time since Todd had bought the bike, Elizabeth pictured herself on the back of it, the wind whipping through her hair, her arms wound tightly around her boyfriend. Enid had thought her

ride was fun, and perfectly safe. And Todd always handled the bike with care....

Could she? This might be her only opportunity to find out what it was really like, to experience it for herself. Wasn't that what writers were supposed to do? Experience things?

"Liz?" Todd asked.

"Why don't you take me?" Elizabeth blurted out, holding her breath.

Todd's brow creased. "But I don't have my--" He followed her gaze to the bike and shook his head. "No. No way. I promised your parents. And besides, you don't want to get on that thing. You've said it a billion times."

"I know. I know what I said," Elizabeth replied, stepping up to the bike. "But it's just one ride and it's not that far. I want to see what's so great about it before you give it away. I want to do that... for you."

"Well, that's okay, because I don't want you to," Todd said firmly.

"Why not?" Elizabeth asked.

"Liz, come on," Todd said, standing on the other side of the bike. "You made a pact with your family. This is a major thing for you. I don't want you to change something like that for me. What if you hate me in the morning?"

"We're not having sex, Todd; we're just going for a ride on the bike," Elizabeth said wryly.

Todd blushed. "Hilarious, Liz. But no. I told your parents I wouldn't make you ride this thing, and I'm not--"

"You're not making me do anything. It's something I want to do," Elizabeth told him. "Just once."

Todd hesitated, but Elizabeth could see she was breaking him down. "But what if your parents find out?" he asked.



"How would they?" Elizabeth replied, feeling deliriously naughty.  
Deliriously

Jessica-esque. "It's just one ride."

Todd took a deep breath and braced his hands on the seat of the bike. Again, he shook his head. "I don't like it."

"I will take full responsibility," Elizabeth assured him, unhooking the pink helmet from the bike. "Come on. You ride this thing every day and it's just a short trip. It'll be fine."

Todd looked up at her, his brown eyes unreadable. "You're sure."

"I'm sure," she said.

And finally, finally, he started to smile. Elizabeth's heart flip-flopped in her chest. She knew she was making another dream of his come true-to ride around town with his girlfriend on the back of his bike.

"Fine. Let's do it," he said.

He climbed onto the bike and fastened his helmet. With a yip of exhilaration and excitement, Elizabeth climbed on behind him, tucking the skirt of her dress between her legs. She rested her feet on the pegs just behind his heels and settled in against him. With her arms wrapped tightly around Todd's waist, she was surprised at how secure she felt. The bike was a lot sturdier than she had imagined. Relief settled over her shoulders. This was going to be fine. In fact, it was going to be fun.

"You ready?" Todd asked.

"Yep," Elizabeth called out.

With that, Todd started the bike and it shook between her thighs as it roared to life. Elizabeth's heart hit her throat as Todd took off down the driveway. He wasn't even going very fast, but those first few seconds were still the most frightening of Elizabeth's life. Even scarier than her first roller coaster

ride. Trying hard to keep from shaking, she hung on to Todd for dear life, every

muscle in her body tight. When Todd began to lean the bike, first to the left, then to the right, Elizabeth closed her eyes and held her breath, certain she was going to fall off at any moment. She was beginning to regret having been so insistent.

You just have to make it to the Caravan, she told herself. That's less than ten minutes away.

Soon they had begun the straight descent toward town, and now that they were beyond the curves of the country club drive, Elizabeth was able to open her eyes again. As she saw the familiar sights whooshing by, she started to relax and enjoy the ride.

"You okay back there?" Todd shouted at one point.

"So far, so good!" she shouted back.

After a couple more turns, Elizabeth felt comfortable enough to lean into them with Todd, their bodies swaying together with the bike. With each negotiated turn, Elizabeth felt as if she'd achieved something. Like when she was first learning to drive and she managed to get through an entire trip to the mall with her mother without making a mistake.

I'm doing it, Elizabeth thought. I'm doing the thing I've always dreaded most. And it's actually kind of fun!

She felt proud of herself for conquering her fears, and happy that she had done this for Todd. All in all, her crappy night was taking a turn for the good.

The rest of the ride was like nothing Elizabeth had ever imagined. Even at Todd's careful speed, the evening air tickled her bare skin and tossed her long hair every which way. With her hands clasped tightly around Todd, she rested her chin on his shoulder and just enjoyed the closeness of him. The more relaxed she felt, the more she was able to appreciate the sensation of

flying through the night air. She finally understood what Todd was talking about when he referred to being surrounded by the elements, and she didn't want the ride to end.

He shouldn't have to sell this thing, Elizabeth thought. Not if it makes him feel like this.

When they got to the club, she was going to insist that he keep the bike. And the next morning, she would sit down with her parents and carefully explain why it was time for them to rethink their rule. There was nothing wrong with a motorcycle. Not when it was being handled by someone as competent as Todd.

She closed her eyes and imagined that she and Todd were the only people on the planet, whizzing through the wind. Nothing could stop them. Nothing at all...

## CHAPTER 9

She pulled away from Brian abruptly--so abruptly that he fell forward and knocked heads with her.

"Ow!" Brian blurted out, bringing his hand to his forehead.

"Okay. That hurt," Jessica said. She slid away from him in the backseat of his car and touched her head with her fingertips. Two seconds before, she had been wrapped up in one of the most amazing kisses she'd ever experienced. Now her forehead was throbbing with pain.

"What's the matter? Did I do something?" Brian

asked, his face half visible in the light coming from the overhead parking lamps in the Caravan lot.

"No. Sorry. I just..." Jessica felt silly admitting what she was about to admit. "I just had the weirdest feeling that Liz needs me."

Brian smirked and reached across the seat to toy with a lock of her hair. "Are you two psychic or something?"

"It's a twin thing," Jessica said. Her heart was pounding rapidly, and not just from Brian's nearness. Something was up. Had she forgotten to do something or-"Oh, no! We were supposed to drive her here!"

"We were?" Brian asked, his brow creasing.

"Yes! I totally spaced," Jessica said. She groped through her bag for her phone to see if Elizabeth had called her, and sure enough, there was one missed call. "She's going to be so mad."

"Okay, calm down. We've already been here half an hour," Brian said, touching her bare shoulder. "I'm sure she's gotten another ride by now. She

probably already went inside and we just didn't see her."

Jessica sat back and pondered that. It made sense. She and Brian hadn't seen much traffic in the past twenty minutes or so. And if Elizabeth was really stranded, she would have called Jessica more than once, right? So why couldn't Jess shake the niggling feeling that something was wrong?

"C'mere," Brian said, tugging on her wrist.

Jessica looked into his gorgeous face and felt herself start to cave. She leaned into him and touched her lips to his again. He ran his hands up into her hair, undoing her carefully constructed chignon, and she sighed as her fallen locks tickled her back. Brian was really good at this. Had he always been, or were college guys really that much more experienced? Jessica scooted closer to him, pressing her legs against his, and deepened the kiss.

Liz.

"Argh," Jessica groaned, pulling away.

"What is it now?" Brian asked.

"We have to go back and see if Liz is still there," she said, pushing her hair back from her face.

Brian sighed. "Jess, come on. Your sister must have realized by now that we left. She has enough common sense to have called someone else."

"I know. I know," Jessica said, shoving open the car door. "She actually has way more common sense than that, but something's wrong. I can just feel it." She stood outside the car and bent at the waist to look back in at him.

"Are you going to get out and drive me or do I have to pickpocket your keys?"

"You're serious," Brian said dubiously.

"Dead serious," Jessica replied. "Come on, Brian. It's like a ten-minute drive. Once I see that she's okay, I'm all yours."

"Fine," Brian said reluctantly.

He got out of the backseat and Jessica quickly jumped into the front. Her heart was racing now and she hoped, for once, that everyone was right about her tendency to be overly dramatic. But something told her that wasn't what this was about. Normally, if she was with a guy as hot as Brian, Elizabeth would never have entered her head again. That was just the way Jess was. Live in the moment. Let everyone else take care of themselves. So the fact that Elizabeth's name kept popping into her mind was very disturbing.

Brian pulled out of the parking lot and drove through town. As he started up the hill that led to the woodsy area where the country club was located, Jessica's breath started to come short and shallow. She gripped her purse in her lap so tightly she was sure she was going to tear it apart.

Something's wrong... something's wrong....

And then Brian went around a turn, and the entire roadway was suddenly illuminated with the eerie orange glow of traffic flares. Up ahead, two police cars were pulled to the side of the road, their lights flashing.

"Looks like an accident," Brian said, easing up on the gas pedal.

"Oh my God," Jessica said under her breath, noticing some shattered glass on the street. "It looks bad."

Suddenly, she couldn't breathe. Please don't let it be anyone I know. Please don't let it be--

"No. Look," Brian said, pointing at an SUV on the opposite side of the road. "It doesn't look damaged at all."

Jessica pulled in some air and was just about to nod in agreement when she spotted the broken remains of a black motorcycle lying about a hundred feet beyond the SUV.

"Oh my God! I think that's Todd's bike!" she gasped, grabbing Brian's arm. "Pull over! Pull over!"

Jessica sat forward in her seat, trying to spot Todd among the men standing around the wreckage as Brian slowly pulled off the road. So this was what the awful feeling was about. It wasn't Elizabeth, but Todd. What if he was badly hurt? Or worse? How was she going to tell Elizabeth?

Trying to swallow her dread, Jessica opened the car door and ran to the scene. She was a few steps away from the bike when a female officer moved in front of her.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," the woman said, holding up both hands. "You can't go any further, miss."

"But that's my friend's bike!" Jessica blurted out, her eyes stinging with tears. "Is he--"

"It's okay. She's her sister."

Jessica started at the sound of Todd's voice. His words didn't register. Only the fact that he was alive did. She whirled around and saw Todd limping toward her from the other side of a police car. Relief flooded through her just as two wailing ambulances came whipping around the curve and slowed to a stop.

"Todd! You're okay!" Jessica cried, throwing herself into his arms.

Todd hugged her back for a millisecond before pulling away. He had a cut on his chin and tears were streaming down his face. "I tried to stop her. I swear I did."

Jessica blinked. "Stop who? What're you talking about?"

Todd pressed his eyes closed. "Liz. She ... she just wanted to try it once. ..."

Todd's words were like an ice pick to Jessica's heart. She froze entirely, not wanting to let them sink in. He didn't mean ... he couldn't mean...

"You'd better come with me, son."

One of the officers put his hand on Todd's shoulder and led him toward an ambulance. It was then that Jessica saw her sister, her body lying twisted and motionless on

the hard pavement. Her blond hair splayed everywhere, her black dress torn, her pink helmet lying ten yards away. Two policemen knelt over her, looking grim.

"Liz!" Jessica screamed. She ran toward her sister as fast as she could, choking for air, tears coursing down her face. "Liz! No! No! No!"

Suddenly, she ran into something solid. It was one of the paramedics, his beefy arm blocking her from getting anywhere near her sister.

"Let me go!" Jessica shouted hysterically. "That's my sister!"

One of the policemen stepped over and held Jessica's shoulders, even as she struggled against the grip of the paramedic.

"Miss, you're going to have to calm down," he said in a soothing voice. "I know it's hard, but please. Take a breath and try to calm down."

"Let me go! Are you insane? That's my sister!" Jessica cried again.

"We know. And we're doing all we can for her," the policeman told her as two paramedics hustled toward Elizabeth with a rolling cot. Someone placed an oxygen mask over Liz's face. They slid an orange board beneath her to help them lift her from the ground.

"Oh my God. Oh my God," Jessica said over and over

again. "Is she okay?" she asked the officer, gripping his arm. "Is she going to be okay? Don't let her die, please. Please, please, please don't let her die."

"Like I said, we're doing everything we can," the police officer told her. "But you have to calm down."



"Please let me see her," Jessica cried, hot tears covering her face as Elizabeth was wheeled toward the ambulance. She looked so small and frail and alone. "She needs me."

"As soon as her condition is stabilized, she'll be taken to the hospital. You can ride there with her."

Jessica nodded blankly. Even in her state of shock, she started to realize that at the very least Elizabeth was still alive. They were giving her oxygen; they thought they might be able to stabilize her condition. These were good things. Jessica took a deep breath and tried her best to calm down so that the police would start to trust her. There was no way that ambulance was taking Elizabeth unless Jessica was in there as well.

"I'll be all right," she told the officer, keeping her voice even. "You can let me go. I promise I won't do anything."

The cop nodded and released her. He walked over to one of his colleagues to talk in low tones, leaving Jessica alone in the middle of the road. Jessica hugged herself,

watching from a few yards off as the medical team worked feverishly on her sister. Brian came up behind her and put his arms around her, but she shrugged him off. She barely knew him. The last thing she wanted right then was his comfort. The only person she wanted to be with was Elizabeth.

A sudden movement caught Jessica's eye over by the parked SUV. Jessica had forgotten all about it, but now she saw that a large handcuffed figure was being dragged out from behind it. Two officers held on to the hulking man's arms as they led him toward one of the police cars. It wasn't until they were practically on top of Jessica that she recognized him. It was Crunch McAllister.

Jessica glanced at the SUV. She looked at the bike. She looked at the spot where her sister's body had lain. And suddenly, it all made sense. Crunch had caused this. Crunch had hit the bike with his massive truck. This was all his fault.

"You did this!" she shouted, seeing red as she stormed toward him.

The police didn't even have time to react before Jessica reached up and smacked Crunch across the face with everything she had in her. She would have done more, but someone dragged her away again. Brian. He

pulled her back a few feet, but not before she smelled the beer on Crunch's breath.

"He's drunk!" Jessica cried. "What's the matter with you?" she shouted toward Crunch. "How could you do this?"

"M'sorry," Crunch mumbled as the cops opened the back door of the cruiser. "Todd was my buddy, you know. He was gonna sell me the bike. I didn't mean it. We made a deal...."

And then the door was closed on him and he slumped in the backseat.

"I can't believe this," Jessica said, shoving her hands into her hair as Brian finally released her. "I can't believe this is happening."

"What do you want me to do?" Brian said, sounding helpless. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No," Jessica replied, feeling numb. "You can go. Just go home. I need to stay with Elizabeth."

"Miss! If you're going to come with us, now's the time!" one of the paramedics shouted to her.

On rubbery legs, Jessica walked to the ambulance. They were loading Elizabeth's stretcher into the back. Jessica waited until her sister was safely inside before climbing in alongside her. The moment she looked down at Elizabeth's face, all the air was sucked from her

lungs. She wasn't prepared to see her twin lying so limply under the oxygen mask, an IV taped to her pale arm, her entire body strapped to the backboard.

She looks dead, Jessica thought, horrified.

Then she shook her head and took a deep breath, clenching her jaw against the thought.

"You're fine," she told her sister, taking her left hand in her own. It was still warm. That was a good thing. "You're going to be just fine."

The paramedic who had first grabbed Jessica crawled in beside her and slammed one of the doors. The other was slammed from the outside and the siren wailed to life.

"I'm not lying to her, am I?" Jessica asked as they bumped off the shoulder and onto the road. "She's going to be okay."

Looking sad and tired, the man sighed deeply. "We're doing all we can. The rest is going to be up to her."

A single tear spilled onto Jessica's cheek. She leaned forward, getting as close as she could to Elizabeth's ear, which was hidden by the thick foam padding the medics had secured around her face.

"Elizabeth Wakefield, listen up," she said firmly. "It's me, Jess. You've had a little accident and they're taking you to the hospital, but you're going to be all right. You are. Do you hear me?"

Elizabeth didn't move. Didn't blink. She didn't even appear to be breathing, even though there was steam in her oxygen mask.

"You're going to get better," Jessica said desperately, the tears falling freely now. "I'm going to help you get better. You and me. Together. As long as we're together, we can do anything, right?"

But even as she said the words, Jessica felt hollow inside. There was no reassurance from Liz. Not so much as a flicker of movement. Something told her that no matter how sure she made herself sound, there was a very good chance that she was wrong.

## CHAPTER 10

TODD SAT IN a hard plastic chair in the waiting room at Joshua Fowler Memorial Hospital, his head in his hands. A gash in his right leg had been stitched and bandaged up and it hurt like mad, throbbing with every beat of his heart, but he wished it hurt even worse. He wished he was lying unconscious in a room somewhere. Wished it were him instead of Liz. How could he have done this to her? How could he have let her get on his bike after everything?

Someone entered the room and Todd looked up. He was waiting for his father to return from the cafeteria. Todd hadn't wanted anything, but his father had said he

needed a task, so he'd gone off in search of snacks. Todd knew that his dad felt almost as responsible as he did, since he was the one who had encouraged Todd to buy the bike in the first place. Todd was grateful that his dad had come down there to wait with him, especially since he knew that his dad would much rather be anywhere else. Both of them would.

There was a commotion by the door, and Todd caught a glimpse of Elizabeth's parents rushing inside. He jumped up instinctively and winced as a shot of pain pierced his leg; then he hobbled around the partial wall behind him to hide from their view. He couldn't deal with them right then. Couldn't handle their grief and their accusations.

They must hate me, he thought, ducking around the corner. How could they not? I hate me.

"Elizabeth Wakefield?" Mrs. Wakefield said to one of the nurses, her voice trembling. "They said she was on this floor. She's our daughter. Do you know how she is?"

"The doctor will be right with you," the nurse replied. Todd peeked around the corner and saw the dark-haired woman point to the chairs in another

waiting area. "Have a seat."

Mr. and Mrs. Wakefield looked at each other, their expressions desperate. Mr. Wakefield sat down and leaned

his elbows on his knees while his wife started walking around the row of chairs. Around and around and around. Todd knew that he should go out there. That he should be brave and face them. But he couldn't seem to make himself move. He was paralyzed by guilt and fear.

The door was shoved open again and Steven Wakefield, Liz's older brother, came rushing in. His brown hair was tousled, and he was wearing an SVU sweatshirt and jeans.

"How is she?" he asked his parents, reaching over to kiss his mother on the cheek. "Anything?"

"We're waiting for the doctor," his father replied.

"Where's Jess?" Steven asked, glancing around.

"Outside on the phone with Enid," his mother said. "She can't seem to sit still."

Steven looked at his parents, who were now both pacing, and managed a wry smile. "Guess that runs in the family," he joked, clearly trying for some levity.

Just then, a fortyish man with a red beard and curly hair came down the hall and chatted with the nurse. She pointed to the Wakefields, all of whom were suddenly on high alert.

I'll just wait here until he tells them how Liz is, Todd thought, his heart in his throat. Then I'll sneak out... somehow.

"Mr. and Mrs. Wakefield?" he said, greeting them. "I'm Dr. Morales, chief of emergency medicine." He shook their hands.

"How's my daughter?" Mrs. Wakefield asked.

"Elizabeth is stable now, but I'm afraid her condition is serious," Dr. Morales began, his tone gentle. "Her helmet came off in the accident. She's in a coma."

Todd felt like he was going to throw up. Mrs. Wakefield's hand flew up to cover her mouth, and Steven went pale. Mr. Wakefield put his arm around his wife.

"A coma," Mr. Wakefield repeated, his voice remarkably calm. "Does she ... will she ..." He cleared his throat. "When will she wake up?"

"The next twenty-four hours are crucial," the doctor explained. "In more mild cases, the patient usually rouses within that time."

"Twenty-four hours," Steven said. "Can you give us anything else? What are her chances?"

"Well, Elizabeth is clearly a healthy girl. Her vitals are good and she didn't sustain any other major injuries, all of which is good," the doctor said. "We're running some tests now to see if we can determine the extent of the damage to her brain. We'll know more once those tests are complete."

"God, it's Rex all over again," Mrs. Wakefield said, driving a stake through Todd's heart.

"I don't want to alarm you," Dr. Morales said. "There is every possibility your daughter can make a full recovery. But with an accident like this, we can't rule out the possibility of brain damage. I just want you to be prepared."

Todd glanced around the corner again and saw all the Wakefields nod grimly.

"Can we see her?" Mrs. Wakefield asked.

"Of course. As soon as she's out of the MRI, we'll move her to intensive care and you can see her then," he told them. "I'll have a nurse come get you."

The moment the doctor was gone, Elizabeth's mother burst into tears. Mr. Wakefield hugged her to him, and Steven, his jaw clenched, stood off to the side, unable to watch his mother weep. Todd couldn't take it anymore. He couldn't be a coward and sneak out of there. He had to face Elizabeth's family, had to tell them how sorry he was. Taking a deep breath, he stepped out of his hiding place and slowly approached them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Wakefield, I--"

Mr. Wakefield looked up and his face turned to stone. "What. The hell. Are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry," Todd said, his heart slamming in his chest.

"I just wanted to see how Liz was and they wouldn't tell me anything--"

"Why should they? You're the reason she's here," Mr. Wakefield said, getting right in Todd's face. "What the hell was she doing on that bike?"

"She ... I ..." Todd's throat closed up and his eyes filled with tears. He glanced at the exit, wondering what he'd been thinking, going over there.

"You broke your word to us, Todd," Mrs. Wakefield said weakly. "You promised us--"

"I know. I know and I'm so sorry," Todd said, choking. "You have to know I never wanted this to happen. I love Elizabeth. I--"

"It should be you in there instead of her," Steven spat, his fists clenched.

He might as well have punched Todd in the gut. "Don't you think I know that? Don't you think I wish it was?" Todd blurted out. "I wish I had said no. I wish I had never let her on the thing."

Just then, Todd's father appeared from the hallway outside the elevators with a coffee in one hand and a bottle of water in the other. He took in the scene and walked right to Todd's side. Mr. Wilkins was exactly Todd's height but had a good fifty pounds of solid muscle on his slimmer son. He was an imposing figure

in any situation and Todd felt better just having him there.

"I think we'd better go now," his father said, putting the drinks down on a low coffee table and then placing his arm around Todd's shoulders. "Come on, son."

"No, Dad," Todd said, wincing away. "I want to stay here and wait."

"There's nothing you can do for Liz right now. And under the circumstances I think the Wakefields would prefer to be alone," his father told him, looking him in the eye. "We can come back in the morning."

Todd glanced at Mr. Wakefield and saw the hatred in his eyes. It broke his heart, but it seemed as if his father was right. His presence in the waiting room was just going to aggravate them. But that didn't mean he couldn't stay at the hospital. He'd simply have to find another room in which to wait and worry. He turned to his father, his back to the Wakefields, and spoke in a whisper.

"I'll just go to another waiting room," he told his dad. "I have to stay near her. In case she wakes up. I have to be here."

Todd's father gave him a bolstering smile and squeezed his shoulder. "All right, then. Call us if you need anything."

Once his father had left, Todd picked up the bottle of

water and left the room without another word to the Wakefields. It was pretty clear they didn't want to be near him for another moment, let alone hear what he had to say. He wandered across the main hallway on the floor and soon found another waiting room, this one deserted, on the opposite side of the wing. Todd walked over to the window and stared out, unable to believe where he was. What had happened. What might happen next.

She's going to be okay. She has to be okay, he thought.

Down in the parking lot, there was a sudden rush of vehicles, and Todd recognized Enid's Prius and a couple of his other friends' cars. They pulled



into spaces and everyone piled out, still in their party gear. Jessica rushed across the parking lot to meet them. She had clearly been waiting for this.

Todd clenched his jaw as he watched the little group of friends take in the news. They all looked so scared and miserable and it was his fault. If he'd never bought that stupid motorcycle, they would all be down at the Caravan right then, celebrating Enid's birthday, having a great time. As the crowd turned to walk into the hospital, another car pulled up and Mr. Collins stepped out. He walked over to join his students and talk to Jessica. For some reason, the more people who showed up in

support of Elizabeth, the more miserable Todd felt. They were all going to hate him now. And they were all going to have to feel the way he did—helpless and scared. All because of him.

Todd couldn't watch anymore. He turned and sat down in one of the plastic chairs, slumping down and pushing his legs out. His eyes stung from crying and his body felt exhausted. All he wanted to do was sleep, but he knew he couldn't until he heard that Liz was going to be all right.

He heard the chatter of hushed voices as the kids from school emerged from the elevators and were led in the opposite direction from Todd's solitary waiting room. He wished he could join them, but he couldn't. He was the enemy right then. After a few sullen minutes, a figure appeared in the doorway.

"You look like you could use someone to talk to."

It was Mr. Collins.

"Is there anything new?" Todd asked, sitting up straight.

"They just told me she's in stable condition but hasn't woken up," Mr. Collins said, still standing in the doorway.

"Nothing new," Todd muttered.

"Come on. Let's go get something to eat," Mr. Collins suggested.

"I'm not really hungry," Todd replied.

"From what I hear, you were injured too. You've gotta keep your strength up," Mr. Collins told him, walking over and putting his hand on Todd's shoulder. "Seriously. This isn't a suggestion; it's an order."

Todd rolled his eyes. "Fine."

He winced against the pain in his leg as he stood, and limped as he followed Mr. Collins out of the room. Luckily, the vending machines were down the hall, farther away from the waiting room where Liz's family and friends were gathered. Todd put some money in the machine and bought himself a bag of pretzels. Mr. Collins got a coffee and a sleeve of mini donuts. Together they went back to the empty waiting room and sat down at a small round table in the corner.

"So, how are you holding up?" Mr. Collins asked.

"Not well," Todd replied. He bit into a pretzel and it tasted like dust. "I don't know what I'm going to do if she doesn't wake up. It's not fair. Why am I walking around fine and she's in there? It's so not fair."

"You think it should be you in there?" Mr. Collins said.

"Yeah, it should be me!" Todd said emphatically. "It was my bike, my responsibility. I should be the one who's... who's..." He couldn't finish the sentence. He paused and rubbed his hand over his eyes and sighed. "It's just not fair."

"Todd, what happened, exactly?" Mr. Collins asked, holding his coffee cup with both hands.

Todd took a deep breath and sat forward. He explained it to Mr. Collins the same way he'd explained it to the police.

"We were coming down the hill and I was going real slow, taking my time--you know, so Liz would feel safe." He had to pause for a moment as a sob welled up in his throat. "We were just coming to a turn when all of a sudden

there were these huge headlights glaring down at me on the wrong side of the road. I tried to swerve, but it was too late. Honestly, I thought I heard the SUV's engine rev. Like when he saw us, he hit the gas by mistake instead of the brakes."

"That must have been terrifying," Mr. Collins said sympathetically.

"All I could think about was Liz," Todd said. "It was about two seconds, but all that went through my mind as we skidded out was trying to hold on to Liz. But she was holding on to me. And when I felt her arms slip . . ."

A tear spilled down Todd's cheek and he quickly wiped it away.

"We don't have to talk about this if you don't want to," Mr. Collins said.

"You know what the most ridiculous thing is?" Todd

said with a sniff. "I knew Crunch had been drinking all night."

"What? How?" Mr. Collins asked, his brow creased.

"I was hanging out over at his house earlier and he kept downing beers," Todd said, feeling lower than low. "But when I left, he swore to me that he wasn't going anywhere, so I figured he'd pass out and sleep it off. Instead, this happens." He paused and hazarded a glance at the teacher, who seemed to be slowly processing all this. "I sold him the bike," Todd told him. "Tonight was going to be my last night with it. If only I hadn't caved in to Liz. But she wouldn't take no for an answer. ... God, I hate myself."

Mr. Collins blinked and looked Todd in the eye. "What do you mean, if you hadn't caved in?"

"I went over to the country club just to talk to her after Enid's party, and when she heard I was giving up the bike, she was all about going for a ride," Todd said. "Like she knew it would be her only chance or something and she just wanted to try it. I should have said no. I'm such an idiot."

"Wait. So you're saying that Liz asked you to take her out on the bike?" Mr. Collins said, sitting up straight. "You didn't talk her into it?"

"No. Why?" Todd asked.

"Well, then I don't really see how this is all your fault, as you seem to believe," Mr. Collins said. "Elizabeth knew what she was doing. She's a smart girl. It sounds to me like she made her own decision and you simply went along with it."

"Yeah, but I don't think she thought any of this was going to happen," Todd said flatly.

"Of course she didn't, but she knew the potential consequences," Mr. Collins said. "This wasn't your fault. And I'm sure the Wakefields agree too."

Todd scoffed bitterly. "You're wrong about that one. They don't even want to look at me right now. They do think it's my fault and they're right."

"No, they're not," Mr. Collins said. "This is Jerry McAllister's fault, no one else's. He was the one who was out driving drunk. He was the one who caused the accident, not you. You can't blame yourself for something you never could have predicted or prevented."

Tears flowed from Todd's eyes and this time he did nothing to stop them.

"Todd, we both know how headstrong Liz can be," Mr. Collins said, scooting forward and resting his arms on the table. "I have a hard time believing anyone could say no to her when she gets on a roll. It's part of the reason she's going to make such an amazing reporter one day."

If she ever wakes up, Todd's morbid mind added.

"Do yourself a favor and let yourself off the hook," Mr. Collins said firmly. "I know Liz wouldn't want you feeling this way."

Todd sniffed and wiped under his eyes. "I know. She wouldn't."

"Good," Mr. Collins said. He finally opened his sleeve of donuts and popped one into his mouth. "My work here is done," he said with a wry smile.

Todd almost smiled back, but then Steven appeared in the doorway, looking as pale as the white hospital walls all around him.

"What is it?" Mr. Collins asked, standing.

"It's Liz," Steven said, gripping the doorjamb with both hands. "Something about the MRI ... They're doing emergency surgery to relieve pressure on her brain. They're not sure if she's going to make it."

## CHAPTER 11

The strong morning sun warmed Todd's face and he blinked a few times as he awoke, trying to get his bearings. It was never this bright in his room. Or this ... itchy. He heard an intercom announcement and sat up straight, suddenly remembering where he was and why he had passed out on this rough old couch.

The accident. The horrible agony of the night before.

He glanced around and found that he was once again alone in his little waiting room. His watch told him that it was seven o'clock. How long had he slept? He had no idea. He remembered being awake at four in the morning, when Elizabeth had come out of her

Surgery. He had waited through the four-hour process alone and in agonized fear until Mr. Collins had come and told him that she had survived the invasive procedure and was back in her room in the ICU--still unconscious.

After he had heard that Elizabeth's condition was stable once again, Todd had finally given in to the fatigue he had been fighting, and he had curled up on an empty sofa in his lounge to sleep. Now he stood up, fueled by new adrenaline, and jogged down to the waiting room outside the ICU. There he found Mr. Wakefield sitting in a chair with his arm around his wife. Both of them looked exhausted and sad. Hesitantly, Todd approached them. He didn't care how they reacted to him right then. He had to know what was going on.

"How is she?" he asked quietly.

"The same," Mr. Wakefield said, his voice dry.

"But there's no permanent brain damage, thank goodness," Mrs. Wakefield added.

"So is she ...?"

"No. She hasn't woken up," Mr. Wakefield said. "She's still in a coma."

Todd's heart sunk. For some reason he had convinced himself that she would wake up during the night. That he would be able to see her smile that morning and tell

her how sorry he was. But no. She was still unconscious. Who knew if he'd ever have the chance to apologize?

"What the hell are you still doing in here?"

Todd whirled around at the sound of Steven's angry voice. He had just walked in, carrying bags of fast-food breakfast, and he looked like he was about ready to tackle Todd to the ground.

"I... I was just--"

"This is all your fault," Steven said, getting right in Todd's face. He threw the bags down onto the table and clenched his fists. "How could you take her out on that thing? How could you when you knew what could happen?"

Todd opened his mouth to respond, but Jessica cut him off.

"Steven, back off," she said firmly.

She walked over to them from the direction of the ICU patient rooms. Her makeup was streaked, her white slacks dotted with dirt, and her hair pulled back in a messy bun. There was a sleep crease down the left side of her face, as if she had slept on a folded sheet all night long. She looked tired and resigned.

"If this is anyone's fault, it's mine," she said, her voice unusually quiet. "Blame me."

"Jessica, what are you talking about?" her father asked.

"I didn't have the guts to tell you this last night, but the only reason Liz had to go with Todd was because I left her there, at the country club," Jessica said, hugging her bare arms. "I totally forgot I was supposed to give her a ride. Self-absorbed, as always," she added bitterly. "If I hadn't been in my own little world, she would have been fine. So blame me, not Todd."

"Oh, honey," Mrs. Wakefield said, getting up and putting her arm around her daughter. "We don't blame you. Either of you," she said pointedly, looking at Todd. "Roger Collins told us about your little talk," she said. "We know Elizabeth asked you to take her for a ride. And we also know how hard it is to say no to that girl when she sets her mind to something."

"We're sorry we were so awful to you last night, Todd," Mr. Wakefield added, standing. "We were just so upset."

"I know. So was I," Todd replied.

Steven sighed. "Sorry, man," he said sheepishly.

"It's okay," Todd said, feeling somewhat relieved. At least he didn't have to avoid Liz's family anymore. At least they could all get through this together.

"You know, I remembered something last night," Jessica said, looking at Todd. "When the police were taking Crunch away, he said he was going to buy your bike. You were selling it to him, weren't you? For Liz."

Todd shrugged. "Yeah. It was no fun without her, so ..."

"Todd, why didn't you tell us any of this last night?" Mrs. Wakefield asked.

"I don't know. I guess I thought it would just sound like I was making excuses or something," Todd said.

Mrs. Wakefield stepped away from Jessica and reached up to hug Todd. "I'm so sorry, kiddo," she said. "I know you love Elizabeth just as much as we do."

Todd nodded as he hugged her back. "I just hope Liz knows," he said. "I hope she knows and that she wakes up soon so we can all tell her."



Once Jessica found out from the doctors that Elizabeth could most likely hear her, she spent the entire day in her sister's room, talking about anything and everything that came to mind. Except for the IV tubes in Liz's arm and the respirator hissing by her side, she looked as if she were sleeping peacefully, so Jessica read to her from Us Weekly, chatted about Enid's party, and told her all about the dozens of people who stopped by all day to visit. She even described all the flower arrangements, balloon bouquets, and stuffed animals that crowded the

room. By the time the sun started to go down, she had talked herself hoarse.

"So then, Lila totally slapped Tom McKay across the face. Can you believe it? She actually risked her nails, so you know he did something seriously wrong," Jessica rattled on. "That's going to have to go in your next column."

She glanced at Elizabeth's face, hoping for some kind of reaction. A blink. A twitch of a smile. But nothing.

"Come on, Liz," Jessica said, sitting down next to the bed and taking Elizabeth's hand. "You have to wake up! You know I can't live without you. Not to put any pressure on you. I mean, the last thing you need right now is pressure, but... what am I supposed to do if you don't wake up?"

There was a quick knock at the door and Jessica jumped up when she saw Todd waiting outside. She opened the door and swiftly ushered him in.

"It's supposed to be immediate family only," she whispered.

"I know. Winston created a diversion so I could sneak by the nurse's station," Todd whispered back.

Jessica smirked. "Do I even want to know?"

"Probably not," Todd said. "It involved a fake seizure and Pop Rocks; let's leave it at that."

Jessica covered her mouth to keep from laughing. Todd glanced over at Elizabeth and his face grew wan.

"How is she?" he asked.

"Well, she's a very good listener," Jessica replied, her mirth dying quickly away. "I overheard a doctor say that the longer she stays like this, the worse her chances will be," she said, her heart skipping a scared beat.

"She'll pull through." Todd took a chair and sat across the bed from Jessica's seat. "She has to."

Jessica sat down again and gazed across Elizabeth's prone form at Todd. "You still think it's your fault, don't you?"

"I shouldn't have taken her. It was late and it was a Saturday night. Of course some drunk jerk was going to be out on the roads. I should have thought ahead." He reached up and touched Elizabeth's hair, tucking it gently behind her ear.

"When I first saw her lying on the road, I wanted to kill you," Jessica confessed. "All I could think about was Rex. But then later, when I realized it was my fault too ... Honestly, I just wanted to kill myself. If Brian and I had only remembered five minutes sooner. .."

"Jess, at that point Elizabeth knew you weren't coming back for her," Todd told her.

"She did?"

"Please. She knows you too well. Why do you think she had Enid's mother pegged for a backup ride?" he said with a twinkle in his eye. "It's not your fault. She could have called a cab or called another friend. She wanted to get on the bike. It was funny, actually. It was so out of nowhere and impulsive ... I kept thinking it was more like something you'd do than her."

"Yeah. It doesn't sound like Liz," Jessica said. She shook her head and looked at her sister. "I swear, when she wakes up, you are gonna see a

whole new Jessica Wakefield."

"What do you mean?" Todd asked.

"I mean I'm going to quit taking advantage of her all the time," Jessica replied. "Making her clean up my crap, asking her to take the blame for me. All of it. I'm done."

"Seriously?" Todd asked, his eyebrows raised.

"She's always doing stuff for me just because I'm her sister, and it's way more than I've ever done for her, believe me," Jessica said, taking Liz's hand again. "I don't deserve a sister like her, but I honestly don't know what I'll do if she doesn't make it."

"I don't know what I'll do either," Todd replied.

"So . . . what can we do?" Jessica asked. "There has to be something. Maybe you can kiss her. Like Sleeping Beauty or something," she suggested, only half joking.

"Yeah. That'll work," Todd said wryly. "But actually, there is something...."

"What?" Jessica asked excitedly. She'd do a rain dance in the nude if she thought it would help.

"All right. It's kind of weird, but ... I was talking to Mr. Collins last night and he told me that he once had this friend who fell into a coma from some kind of drug overdose. The guy's family was kind of New Agey and they did this thing. ... It sounded silly when he explained it, but the guy actually did wake up."

"What is it? I'll try anything," Jessica said, feeling a spark of energy. If there was one thing she hated, it was waiting. She had always been a take-action kind of person.

"All right, then. Hold on to her hand," Todd instructed.

Jessica shifted her hand so that it was under Elizabeth's and she could hold on tightly.

"Now take mine," he said, reaching over Elizabeth's legs.

Jessica extended her arm across the bed, and Todd grasped her cold fingers in his warm palm. Then he gripped Elizabeth's hand with his other hand.

"Okay, now close your eyes and think of her how she was last night," Todd said. "All dressed up and happy and full of life."

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Jessica did as she was told. She felt tears well up in her eyes as she remembered Liz laughing on the dance floor with Robin and Winston and the others.

"Now we just repeat over and over, 'Wake up, Liz. Wake up, Liz....,'" Todd said.

Jessica's eyes flew open. "That's it? That's the whole plan?"

"I told you it was bizarre," Todd replied. "But who knows? Maybe it'll work. You guys are always saying you have that twin intuition thing and I like to think we have a connection too. You never know."

"All right, all right," Jessica replied. "I said I'd do anything."

She clasped Todd's hand more tightly and closed her eyes. If she was going to do this thing, she was going to give it everything she had. So she concentrated as hard as she could on that image of Elizabeth and repeated firmly.

"Wake up, Liz. Wake up, Liz. Wake up, Liz."

She would repeat it all night long, if only it would bring her sister back.

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